

THIS WICKED WORLD

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THIS WICKED WORLD.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS H. LOVETT CAMERON,

AUTHOR OF

“IN A GRASS COUNTRY,”
“A DEVOUT LOVER,” “NECK OR NOTHING,”
“A NORTH COUNTRY MAID,”
Etc., Etc.

“Each for himself. To play out life's great game
To fail and fall ; or win a deathless fame.
What matter, if the weak are thrust aside—
If some sink hopeless in the swirling tide,
If some are faint and some to earth are hurl'd—
Who cares ? Who troubles in this Wicked World !”
A SONG OF LIFE.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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CHAPTER I.

A JUNE MORNING.

It would be impossible, perhaps, to conceive a more charming picture of English home scenery than that which lay before the windows of Mrs Bertram's house.

A broad expanse of meadow-land, across which a river wound in graceful curves betwixt a border of grey pollard willows, a bank of low wooded hills in the distance. To the left, a cosy farmstead nestling amongst the trees ; to the right, the glimpse of a church spire beyond the fields ; and in the foreground, sleek-coated Alderney cows, munching their way drowsily through the lush buttercup-spangled grass, or standing knee-deep in peaceful meditation in the cool shallows of the stream.

The house itself—which was neither cottage nor mansion, but something that, whilst larger than the former, was yet infinitely smaller than the latter—had a grey slate roof, square white-washed walls, and uncompromisingly staring windows, guiltless alike of bows or mullions. Yet was it redeemed from positive ugliness by a wealth of Gloire de Dijon roses that had clambered half across it, and by myriads of starlike jessamine blossoms that shone out whitely from the mantle of their dark foliage, filling the air with heavy-scented sweetness. Just outside the windows lay a broad gravel walk, bounded by a low stone wall, from whence a short flight of steps led down to the flower-garden below.

Leaning upon this stone wall one bright sunshiny morning in summer, and contemplating the prospect I have endeavoured to describe, was a young girl of nineteen.

She was dressed in a checked blue-and-white cotton dress,

gathered loosely into a band round a small dainty waist; she wore no hat, and her nut-brown hair was a little ruffled by the breeze about her brow—a white sunshade held over her shoulder framed in her charming face with a snowy background. It was a face that was emphatically charming rather than beautiful,—grey eyes with heavy lids, that gave them a certain dreaminess of expression; a short straight nose, and curved red lips which, when at rest, had a little plaintive droop at the corners. When she smiled, this vanished, and the face lit up into a wonderful brightness, but when it was quiet, it was a sad little mouth.

It is difficult to see what, at nineteen years of age, could have produced that shade of disappointment in so fair a face, and yet had you questioned her closely, Elizabeth Bertram would certainly have told you that she had quite troubles enough to account for it.

To have arrived at the age of nineteen and to have never yet been at a ball—to be fair and never yet to have been told so save by her looking-glass—to be doomed to walk up and down for four mortal hours of her daily existence, and, above all, to have been christened Elizabeth, and never to have had the name softened into any more euphonious sobriquet, are not these trials enough to vex and perplex the heart of any English maiden?

Elizabeth is thinking over her troubles now, and the corners of her mouth droop more than ever. She is so tired of it all,—of the “daily task, the trivial round,”—of the beautiful world that is opening before her in vain, bringing her neither pleasure to set her pulses tingling, nor yet happiness to fill the vague cravings of her nature. Only every day the same thing—the little home chit-chat—the silly little gossip of the neighbours when they come to tea, and she has to hand about the bread and butter and the sugar—and that eternal walking up and down upon the terrace walk, that is perhaps the only real grievance that she has to endure.

The daily treadmill is about to begin. She hears the sound of the window-sash as it is thrown up behind her, and her mother's voice calling to her,—

“Elizabeth, my dear!”

She turns with a sigh of resignation.

Mrs Bertram comes out through the window, her daughter offers her her arm, and they begin to walk up and down.

Mrs Bertram is neither old nor infirm nor decrepit—she is simply a silly woman who delights in fancying herself an invalid. A veritable *malade imaginaire*. For all these years that Elizabeth has waited upon her, she has not yet been able to discover the nature of the malady from which her mother suffers. It

has something to do with her back, she believes, and is also vaguely connected with her nervous system. At least these are the things after which she dutifully makes daily inquiry, although at the bottom of her heart she is a profound disbeliever in there being anything wrong with either of them.

Mrs Bertram in her youth must have been a very lovely woman, far better looking than her young daughter is now; and there are traces of great beauty still left about her.

She is a small slight little lady, with fluffy hair, still brown and luxuriant, piled up in a fashionable manner on the top of her head, with a coquettish lace cap resting upon it; with clean-cut features still, despite the wrinkles and the faded skin; grey eyes that are a little less soft and dreamy than Elizabeth's, and a mouth where the same pathetic downward droop is exaggerated from disappointment into discontent.

Once she was a noted beauty, courted, flattered, and admired, with crowds of men mobbing her at balls, and a shower of bouquets flung beneath her feet. Now she is only a little middle-aged widow lady, whose sole pleasure it is to recount her past conquests to her child, and whose greatest excitement is the daily visit of the village doctor.

To that doctor is due the process so hateful to the daughter of "walking up and down." Dr Fairgrave has recommended exercise, and as Mrs Bertram will wear nothing but very high-heeled French shoes, it follows that she can only take the exercise required upon the gravel walk outside her drawing-room windows. Now and then hot sea baths are also added to the regimen, and then Mrs and Miss Bertram emigrate to the little seaside town of Sandypoint, fifteen miles away, where the process of promenading repeats itself interminably upon the tiny asphalted esplanade.

Oh, that walking up and down! Was ever a young creature with a fair amount of reason and individuality of being, subjected to so maddening and monotonous a proceeding! Sometimes, indeed, as the drudgery progressed with lagging footsteps, Elizabeth felt as if verily and indeed she should lose the use of her wits. Up to the wall on one side, that looked over the strawberry beds, back to a certain white pebble on the other, that gleamed beacon-like between her poor little feet and the grassy slope of the garden lawn; and all the time, Mrs Bertram's reminiscences!

Stories of how she was the belle of the Bath ball,—of how "Sir James Ingram was *mad*, my dear, quite mad, because I threw him over for Count Ludovico Branzitta, a most ravishing man, Elizabeth, with the most glorious tenor voice that you can conceive, and coal black hair and eyes: people said that when

he got the news—I mean that I was engaged to your poor father—that he fell back off his chair in a dead faint. Ah, poor fellow, he *was* fond of me!” Then a pause, and Elizabeth, who had heard it all before many and many a time, but was still expected to make some sort of remark, would murmur, with attentive interest,—

“And Sir James Ingram, mother?”

“Oh, yes,” with a little conscious smile; “he, poor dear fellow, rushed out of the room like a whirlwind—positively; he cried out to somebody, I forget who, but several heard him, ‘Miss Lanyers is sending me to destruction!’ I believe he used another word beginning with d, but I won’t be certain. He went off to Homburg, and half-ruined himself at the gambling tables. It shows, Elizabeth, what blighted love will do!”

Elizabeth heard all about it again to-day,—how her mother went on from Bath to Cheltenham, and from Cheltenham to London itself, and how in each place a track of bloodshed and despair—duels, suicides, broken hearts, and ruined fortunes—was left, comet like, in her wake.

“They used to call me ‘Dresden China,’ you know, Elizabeth, because I was so slight, I suppose, and had such a delicate complexion; and I well remember a couplet I received one Valentine’s Day, which everybody thought very pretty and appropriate, although I could never find out exactly which of my beaux sent it me. This is how it ran,—

“Of delicate material formed is she
Who shatters all, yet goes herself scot free.
A thousand hearts in thousand atoms break
And daily die for Dresden China’s sake.”

“It sounds like an acrostic,” murmured Elizabeth, with a wearied expression, and a smothered yawn, that were completely thrown away upon her mother’s self complacent reminiscences; and then suddenly she propounded a problem of her own to her parent.

“Do you know, mother, that I am nineteen, and that I have never been either to a ball, or even to a dinner-party yet? How do you account for it?”

Mrs Bertram was silenced for a minute—it took her a little effort, evidently, to turn her mind from the rapt contemplation of her own life to the consideration of her daughter’s.

“It is certainly strange,” she said presently, as though the idea presented to her mind was an entirely new one. “Of course, I was born and bred in a social atmosphere as it were. I hope, Elizabeth, that you do not grudge me my past successes and conquests. It is not my fault that you are less fortunate than I was.”

"I do not grudge you anything," answered the girl, with a heightened colour—"I only wanted to call the fact to your notice. Does it not strike you as somewhat hard that you should have had so much pleasure whilst I have none at all?"

"You seem to be reproaching me, Elizabeth. I do not prevent you going into Society—you are quite welcome to go wherever you are asked; indeed, I have done my utmost for you, in settling in this county. I thought as the Brabberstones are cousins of your poor father's, they would have done something in the way of taking you out."

"The Brabberstones! why, they are never at home for more than a month twice a year!"

"Well, is that my fault? It seems to me that you are a very ungrateful girl! Have I not enough to bear in my lonely widowed life, with all the sad load of memories of my lost days of happiness, without being reviled by my only child?" and Mrs Bertram applied her little lace-edged square of cambric to her eyes.

"I did not know I was reviling you." Elizabeth's voice was hard, and there was no sympathetic glance in her eyes.

"Besides," continued Mrs Bertram, "look at the difference! I was a beauty—and beauty always makes its own way—and you—" and she looked the girl up and down. "I don't say that you are otherwise than pleasant-looking, my dear, but you will certainly never set the world aflame with your looks—you must not expect it. No doubt some good, worthy husband will turn up for you some day."

Elizabeth laughed a little angrily and scornfully.

"I neither want to set the world on fire as you did, mother, nor to find a husband, worthy or unworthy. I simply should like to have a little amusement, just as other girls have, whether they are plain or pretty. But I think you must have been walking long enough: will you go in now?"

"Yes—I will go and rest, I think. You are very upsetting to my nerves, my dear child; I daresay you don't mean it, but you don't understand how delicately I am constituted. I will go in now. Mind you let me know at once when Dr Fairgrave calls."

Elizabeth was left alone once more upon the terrace.

"No," she said to herself, rather sadly. "I daresay I don't understand her, any more than she understands me!" And then she went back to the low wall, and leant idly and dreamily upon it as she had done before.

"Elizabeth!" said a voice immediately below her.

There stood upon the grass beneath a tall young lady, fashionably dressed, with dark eyes and hair, and a pale oval face.

"Good heavens, Rachel! where on earth do you spring from?"

The Honourable Rachel Brabberstone laughed, and displayed a set of very even white teeth. She was a handsome young woman, and the laugh lit up her somewhat massive features with a very pleasant brightness.

"You look like a melancholy maiden in a moated what's its name! I have been watching you as I came across the lawn—you were so lost in dreams that you never saw me, and I am sure I am big enough."

Elizabeth ran lightly down the steps, and flung her arms gladly about her neck: her face was radiant.

"Ah, how delighted I am to see you, Rachel! When did you come? and what brings you here in June? Have you all come down? How long are you going to stay?"

"One question at a time, if you please, my dear," laughed her friend. "If you were not such a retired country mouse, you would have guessed that we should be coming down. Don't you know that Parliament is dissolved, and that there is to be a General Election, and so everybody is scurrying away from London to the country; and papa has come down to Brabberstone to see the Conservative man through. Oh, we are going to have grand doings, I can tell you."

"How delighted I am! Then you have really come to stop? Oh, if you knew how bored I have been for months! not a creature to the house but Dr Fairgrave, and Mr Hicks the curate!"

"So even I am a godsend!" laughed Miss Brabberstone. "Well, now, I can't stop a minute; I have only come with a message from mamma. You see, we expect a lot of people to-night to dinner to meet the Conservative candidate, who is coming to stay with us during the whole time of the canvass, and Lady Maxwell has just sent to say that she has fallen downstairs and sprained her ankle, so that makes a woman short for dinner—a thing mamma hates, it puts the table out so—so she wants to know if you will come and fill the place? You must put on your best frock, you know, Elizabeth, and look your nicest."

Elizabeth looked a little awestruck.

"Lady Brabberstone wants *me*!" she repeated. Was it not her mother, perhaps, that the message was meant for?

"Yes, *you*, child," persisted Rachel, laughing. "Why, you look quite frightened! After dinner, there will be some people in the evening, and mamma says we may get up a little dance in the picture-room."

The very word was enough to set Elizabeth's heart beating.

"A dance!" she cried, clasping her hands together; "and I have never been to a dance in my life! Oh, I wonder if mother will let me go?"

"Run away and ask her quickly then, because I must not stay," replied Rachel.

And Elizabeth, regardless of wrath to come, flew in and aroused her mother in the very middle of her nap, in order to impart her wonderful news, and to extract the required permission.

"Go to dinner at the Castle! Dear me, how odd of Lady Brabberstone not to ask me!" was her mother's remark. "I should really have thought, considering that she is a second cousin of your poor dear father, and that I am his widow, the compliment might have been more fitly paid to me. Are you quite sure, Elizabeth, that you have understood Rachel rightly?"

"Oh, yes, quite, quite sure, mother dear, because I asked her; and they are going to dance after dinner. Oh, do say yes, mother dear!"

"Dear me, how impatient and silly you are, child!" I do wish you would not come rushing in like a whirlwind; you awoke me out of my sleep, the very worst thing for my nervous system, Dr Fairgrave says; you really should be more careful!"

"But may I go to-night, mother? may I go?" cried poor Elizabeth breathlessly.

"Oh, dear me, yes. I'm sure I don't know what you have got to wear,—nothing at all decent enough to appear in,—but that is your affair, if you choose to go. Oh, yes, you can go. But I do really think it is most odd—most odd and most unaccountable, that Lady Brabberstone should have asked you and not me. I should have been far better suited to take the vacant place at the dinner-table. It is really extraordinary!"

But Elizabeth was out of the room and heard no more.

CHAPTER II.

ELIZABETH MAKES HER "*DÉBUT*."

AMIDST a blaze of flowers and lights, a shimmer of satin and lace, and a bewildering buzz of conversation, Elizabeth found herself at last safely seated at the long table at Brabberstone Castle, by the side of the gentleman who had escorted her into dinner.

She had undergone an agony of shyness, and a whole multitude of tremors, consequent upon her introduction, alone and unprotected, into a large drawing-room full of guests, all of them total strangers to her. The sense of isolation, and the magnificent London-made dresses of the ladies, had rendered her for some moments almost incapable of speech, or even of observa-

tion ; then out of the glitter and the crowd Lady Brabberstone had come forward, and had introduced her as "my young cousin" to a male being, who had bowed and offered his arm, and in the next moment she was being led away in the long procession across the hall to the dining-room.

It was something to feel herself safely landed, with all dangers for the present in abeyance, upon a solid mahogany chair, with a plate full of turtle soup in front of her.

For the first time Elizabeth glanced shyly at the partner of her fate.

He was old enough to be her father. She had been too much perturbed to hear his name, but it was a distinct relief to her to see a kind elderly gentleman with a grizzled moustache, and a face covered with wrinkles, smiling blandly and kindly down upon her. What would she have done, said Elizabeth to herself with a shudder, if a fashionable young London exquisite, like the one who sat on the other side of the table focussing her with his eyeglass, had been her fate? That young man, with his high collar and waxed moustache, with his faultless shirt front, and the carnation in his button-hole, would have been as a denizen of another world to her ; but the kind-looking old man who had been apportioned to her was at least a human being like herself, she felt sure she would be able to answer him if he were good enough to talk to her at all.

"I think Lady Brabberstone said you were her cousin, Miss Bertram?" said the old gentleman, smilingly. Evidently he knew her name, although she was in ignorance of his.

"A very distant cousin. My father was a second cousin of hers. I don't know quite what that makes of me!" and Elizabeth smiled back at him pleasantly.

"Was not your father Colonel Leonard Bertram of the 4th Dragoons?"

"You knew him?" cried Elizabeth, with interest.

"Certainly—and your mother too. Dear, dear, and so you are the daughter of the beautiful Miss Lanyers! Who would have thought it!"

Elizabeth reddened.

"You mean that I am not much like her?"

Her companion laughed.

"I mean nothing of the sort, my dear young lady ; you are like her—very. I was only wondering at the flight of time, which has made her so soon the mother of a lovely grown-up woman. Not that you are so beautiful as your mother was, my dear, indeed there are few either of the past or present generation who can in any way compare with her," and the old

gentleman sighed. "Perhaps," he added, after a pause, "you may have heard her speak of me?"

Elizabeth could have answered that all her mother's admirers were so well known to her, that could she only rightly determine to which of them she had the honour of conversing, she would be able to tell him as much about his past as he knew himself.

"If I knew your name?" she began, with a little hesitation.

Her companion pushed towards her the little slip of card that had lain upon his table-napkin, and which had got hidden under his plate.

Upon it was inscribed "Sir James Ingram."

Instantly Elizabeth's face lit up with pleasure and comprehension.

"Oh, but I know you quite well—perfectly well!" she cried delightedly. "You are the man who nearly went off your head because mother became engaged to my father, and you rushed off to Homburg and gambled away—"

"A good deal more money than I could afford to lose," interpolated Sir James, looking very much amused. "That's the man, my dear! Who would have thought it, to look at me now?—but all Miss Lanyers' admirers were inconsolable at her engagement."

"Yet you, at least, very soon consoled yourself," said Elizabeth, "for you married within the year. And your wife—is she here?" and she glanced quickly round the table.

"My wife died the following year, Miss Bertram, so that I have been as good as a bachelor ever since."

Elizabeth murmured a word of regret: she felt sorry that she had spoken so freely. But Sir James did not seem to be upset by the allusion.

"Never mind, my dear, it was a very natural mistake on your part. I will try and come and see you and your mother during my short visit at Brabberstone. Do you live far?"

"No, only a mile and a half; in fact, it is only a mile across the fields. Mother will like to see you, I know."

"I shall walk over to-morrow morning," said Sir James with decision; and then somebody addressed a question to him across the table, and Elizabeth found herself at leisure to look about her.

To a girl who had never been at a dinner-party in her life before, the sight of the long table covered with white exotic flowers, and delicate hothouse ferns, and set forth with rare glass, and old silver and china, was of itself by no means an uninteresting spectacle. The dinner too, a succession of wonderful dainties of whose very names and component parts she was in ignorance, handed round in an interminable succession of silver

dishes, filled her with astonishment and admiration; whilst now that Sir James was no longer talking to her, she had no time to eat any of them, by reason of the deep interest she took in watching and making mental notes of every guest round the table. From her hostess in velvet and point lace and diamonds, at the head of the table, down to her host, in an immaculate shirt-front, at the foot of it, every face was scanned in turn by her observant eyes.

Lady Brabberstone indeed, as well as her Lord, requires a few passing words of notice. She was a handsome, dark-browed woman, very like her daughter Rachel. It was said that there was Jewish blood in her veins, but, if so, it had been so well and so repeatedly diluted, that but little trace remained save the coal-black hair and pale skin of the recognised Hebrew type. And Lady Brabberstone had brought a substantial fortune with her, a fortune which had built up and replenished the somewhat impoverished coffers of the house of Brabberstone, so that her husband was enabled to take his place once more amongst his fellows, and hold up his head again amidst those that are rich in the land. And therefore his fellows were of opinion that he had made a very fortunate marriage. Lady Brabberstone had given to her husband two children only—Rachel, who was three-and-twenty, and one son two years younger, who in his looks, as the old books have it, “favoured” his father rather than his mother.

Lord Brabberstone was a thin angular man with ugly features, a sallow complexion, and close-cropped red hair—and the Honourable Guy resembled him. Truth to say, the Honourable Guy was the thorn and trouble of his father’s house. High hopes had been entertained of him, high ambitions built up concerning his career; but hopes and ambitions alike were destined to failure. Mr Brabberstone had been quietly removed from Eton for reasons known only to his parents and his tutor; had subsequently been sent down from Oxford for getting drunk in the streets, with an intimation that his name had better be removed from the books; and he had finally been summarily dismissed from a clerkship at the Foreign Office, which his father’s interest had with some difficulty secured for him. After that, the heir had been sent abroad to travel and see the world, with injunctions that he had best not show his face at home until these disgraces and scandals had blown over. It was hoped that he had “had a lesson,” and would not offend again; but Guy Brabberstone was hopelessly weak and irredeemably vicious, and the chances of his turning over a new leaf were known to be but slender.

Meanwhile the pride and pleasure of both parents centred itself naturally in their daughter. Rachel was handsome and clever, she was too good a daughter to run counter to her parents' wishes, and too sensible a woman to throw herself rashly away. That she might make in due time such a marriage as would bring credit to her family, and solid happiness to herself, was the not unreasonable desire of both Lord and Lady Brabberstone.

Rachel, as she sat at her father's dinner-table, looked well, and talked with animation. She sat between a Member of Parliament, who was also a leader at the Bar, and a young Viscount, who was considered one of the most rising men in the country, and who was markedly attentive to her; and Elizabeth envied her friend the ease with which she talked sometimes to one sometimes to the other, and often to both together, entering with sense and spirit into all subjects, both social and political, and holding her own with perfect facility in the warfare of words between the clever talkers on either side of her.

Politics indeed appeared to be pretty generally under discussion on every side of her: the chances of the coming election, and the more special hopes of the candidate for their own district of East Sulshire, being freely descanted upon—and it was in one of the brief pauses in the flow of conversation around her, that the gentleman on Elizabeth's other hand, who had hitherto been so absorbed in conversation with a handsome married lady whom he had taken in to dinner, that she had seen nothing of him save his back and shoulder, now suddenly veered round upon her, and said, in a voice that somehow had a ring of authority in its tones,—

“And do you take any interest in politics, Miss Bertram?”

Elizabeth looked at him, and a brief mental classification went on within her. He was a young man of perhaps eight-and-twenty—tall and broad-shouldered, and his face and head were distinctly noticeable. He had large dark blue eyes, that had something of command in their steadiness and clearness, and his features, if somewhat massive, were exceedingly well shaped. He was clean shaven, so that the almost classical lines of his face and throat were set off to their utmost advantage. His hair, which was remarkably thick, lay in a shock of waving brown curls above a broad and powerful forehead; and his very dress had a fashion and style of its own—it was neither so precise as that of the ordinary man about town, nor so careless as that of the savant or the bookworm, and yet there was something about it that, whilst it suited itself pre-eminently to the man who wore it, would probably have appeared unbecoming upon any one else.

As a matter of fact, this gentleman's toilette was as carefully studied, and as elaborately carried out, as that of the veriest fop in the company.

As Elizabeth took in all these details at a glance, she said to herself,—“What a Byronic-looking young man! I wonder how he knew my name!” and then she noticed the little name card by the side of her fork, and thought how quick-eyed he must be to have read it already.

“I am afraid I know very little about politics,” she said aloud, in answer to his question; “but there is one thing I should like to know, and perhaps you can tell me.”

“What is that?”

“I was told that the Conservative candidate for East Silshire was to be here this evening, and I have not been able to make him out—which is he, please?”

The Byronic man looked at her fixedly for half a second or so—it was a little way he had—then he smiled, and replied,—

“You must remember that I am a stranger here. I have presumably no more the art of divination than you have; what makes you think that I can enlighten you?” and then he looked at her again, in that steady fashion of his, accompanying the look by a little jerk of his chin—a chin that was cleft by a characteristic dimple—as though to say, “Now, what will you answer to that, I wonder?”

Elizabeth answered by looking slowly up and down the table—then she looked back at her new acquaintance.

“Let us try and guess, as we neither of us know then,” she said simply.

“By all manner of means!” he answered promptly. “Now, what sort of looking man is he, do you suppose?”

“Haven't the least idea. But of course he is old.”

“Is he?—why?” There was a sudden gleam of fun that twinkled up into his eyes.

“Oh, *all* Members of Parliament must be old,” said Elizabeth decidedly.

“How delightful!” he replied, rather irrelevantly, as it seemed to her, and this time there was laughter bubbling over every feature of his face; “but perhaps,” he added, with an effort at composure, “perhaps you can tell me this old gentleman's name—that might help us, you know.”

“No. Unfortunately Miss Brabberstone never told me that; she only called him the ‘Conservative Candidate.’ That doesn't give one many details, does it? It might as well be the Commissioner of Lunacy, or the Counsel for the defence, for all the individuality contained in the definition, mightn't it?”

And they both laughed.

"I am certain," said Elizabeth, with a sudden seriousness, "that it must be that man opposite. Look at him."

The Byronic eyes followed the direction of hers. Exactly opposite to them sat a little old gentleman with neat white whiskers framing in a smug round cherubimic face, a pair of spectacles on his nose, and a neat little bald head. He was silently engrossed in devouring *Pigeons à la Bordelaise aux Truffes*.

"What makes you think it is he?" he asked, with serious interest.

"Because he is eating so much dinner."

Her companion fairly flung back his head, and laughed so loud and so heartily that Lady Brabberstone, looking down the table, wondered what on earth he could find to amuse him so much in the conversation of a little ignorant country girl like Elizabeth.

"Miss Bertram, you will be the death of me!" he cried, as soon as he could speak.

Elizabeth looked offended.

"I really don't know why you should laugh so much. If you had to make a speech in public to-morrow, as that poor man probably has to do, you would not unnaturally be eating a very good dinner to-night, in order to lay up strength; that is what he is doing it for, no doubt."

Her friend was as solemn as a judge in a minute. He recalled a dish that he had just passed by, and helped himself somewhat largely from it. This seemed to Elizabeth to be an accidental incident.

"Then you are quite sure that must be the doomed individual?" he said gravely, after a mouthful or two, turning himself towards her, shoulders as well as head, after a fashion of his own, and laying his knife and fork down.

"Well, I cannot make out that it can be anybody else; and a man who was going in for that kind of thing would look rather grave and serious as that gentleman does, I think. He must have plenty to think about, I fancy, and would not be much inclined to talk."

He looked across the table at the supposed candidate, who was now wiping his lips with his table-napkin.

"I daresay you are right," he observed gravely, after a moment or two devoted apparently to contemplation; "it would be unpardonable frivolity, if on the eve of such an event, he were to laugh and talk—as—as you and I are doing, for instance."

And then the little old gentleman, in the act of raising his

champagne to his lips, caught his opposite neighbour's eye, and smiled, and nodded, and seemed to drink his health across the table.

"How is that!" said Elizabeth, looking disconcerted. "You know him then?"

"Oh, no; not at all."

"But why did he drink your health?" she persisted suspiciously.

"He merely takes me for an elector, you know. They have to be civil."

She seemed to be scarcely satisfied by his answer, and continued to look at him with eyes full of grave inquiry. But at that moment a diversion occurred.

A solemn dignitary in black, his lordship's "own gentleman," approached him with a little flutter amongst the other attendants, and handed him a note upon a silver salver.

Lord Brabberstone murmured an apology to his guests, and broke the seal of his letter. There was a sort of pause in the conversation; then Lord Brabberstone looked down the table, and called out,—

"I say, Cunningham, can you be ready to start as early as nine o'clock to-morrow morning?"

To Elizabeth's intense surprise her Byronic neighbour tossed up his head quickly, and replied,—

"Certainly I can. What is it?"

"It's a letter from Mr Mumford, the energetic publican I told you about; he thinks you ought to be in Hamerton not later than nine-thirty to-morrow, as you ought to interview the men on your committee before going to the Town Hall. They seem to expect it, it appears; it won't do not to start fair."

"All right, I'm game."

"That will mean early breakfast, and a nine o'clock start. None of you ladies will be down," turning to the one who sat on his right hand.

The conversation buzzed on again. Mr Cunningham was tackled by his married lady, and had almost turned his back upon Elizabeth. Sir James Ingram was asking her what was the best hour for finding her at home, and murmuring something incoherent about the beauty of youth. The room seemed to swim round her, and all the lights to be dancing about in a fog.

Lady Brabberstone gave the signal for the ladies to leave. Elizabeth struggled to her feet, and escaped amongst the throng of silk and satin gowns, without daring to venture so much as a look in the direction of the Byronic young man.

"Well, Miss Elizabeth," said Rachel playfully to her when

they were in the drawing-room, "I hope you have enjoyed your first dinner-party? You looked as if you did. And let me tell you, my dear, you have had quite a little success! Why, Mr Cunningham talked and joked with you for half the time: it isn't everybody that he is equally gracious to, I assure you!"

"Oh, Rachel!" gasped poor Elizabeth, "who is he? Who is Mr Cunningham?"

"Who is Mr Cunningham? Didn't I tell you? Why, the Conservative candidate, of course!"

CHAPTER III.

THE CONSERVATIVE CANDIDATE.

MARCUS CUNNINGHAM was a young man of whom great things were expected. The only son of a very wealthy man, whose wealth had been devoted not to the pursuit of pleasure, but to the culture of literature and science, he had been predestined from his childhood to realise all the ambitions of his father's heart. From his boyhood he had been carefully prepared and trained for a public career. Sir Frederick Cunningham had been debarred by an uncontrollable shyness, and by the physical defect of an impediment in his speech, from becoming that which he desired to see his son, but even with these drawbacks he had achieved a high position upon another branch of the tree of fame. His "*History of Europe in the Eighteenth Century*" was a work of no mean capacity, and had attracted the attention not only of the leading men of letters of the age, but also of the most distinguished politicians, both at home and abroad. The amount of research displayed in these interesting volumes, and the powerful grasp they evinced of the mind of the writer upon the political relations of the nations of the earth to one another, had been said to have been not without effect upon the great Bismarck himself, who was reported to have been profoundly impressed by the far-sighted wisdom displayed in the book, and to have remarked concerning its author, that Sir Frederick Cunningham should have certainly been not an historian, but a Minister of Foreign Affairs.

In young Marcus all his father's talents were believed to be reproduced, in addition to other gifts that were peculiarly his own. A striking personal appearance and a singularly winning manner, coupled with a great fluency of language and an indomitable force of will and energy, seemed to mark him out by nature for that prominent position in the world—that leader-

ship of the minds of men, to which his father's deficiencies had debarred him from aspiring. Marcus Cunningham was specially trained and taught to become an orator. To have opinions of his own, and to uphold them strongly, was born in him, but to give a due expression to those opinions, so that the world might listen and be converted to them, was what his father's teaching had been careful to instil into him.

For such a man there was but one career open : that of a Parliamentary life. Already he had come forward to lead a forlorn hope in two northern boroughs, where his untiring energy and passionate eloquence had won quite an unexpected and respectable minority; and now, these trial trips having been considered sufficient to attract notice towards him in many quarters, both friendly and inimical, Marcus Cunningham had come forward, in answer to many eager invitations, to contest the important constituency of East Silshire.

Of his private character it will be necessary also to say a few words, although in truth his private character was so bound up with his public ambition that it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other. For ambition, both by his own integral instincts and by the precepts and training of his life, was the very keynote and mainspring of Marcus Cunningham's being. He had been taught that all else must give way to the one grand object of his life, and that to become a great man he must not linger nor loiter upon the way, not look aside either to the right or the left, but press onwards ever to the goal to which he was bound. Socially, Marcus was exceedingly popular, and had by no means neglected to cultivate those accomplishments and attractions which go so far to endear a young man to the fair sex. He was an amusing talker upon all light topics, a good rider, and a graceful dancer; and, above all, he was a master in the art of conducting those pleasant trivial flirtations which, whilst they breathe the very soul and essence of flattery into a woman's ear, yet commit neither of the actors in the little farce to anything more serious than the pleasure of the passing hour. But underlying all these social trivialities, the ruling passion of his nature was ever awake and on the alert. He never forgot for one moment that to be successful as a public man it is needful to raise oneself by the aid of one's fellow-men, and more especially of one's fellow-women,—that to bestow more than a passing smile upon those who are incapable of lending him an upward hand, was sheer waste of time; and that to neglect any opportunity, however small, of furthering the great object of a man's life, would be the rankest and most unpardonable folly. Indeed, had

Marcus himself been inclined to forget it, his father, in his almost daily letters—letters that might, had they appeared in print, have been justly quoted as the admonishments of a modern Lord Chesterfield—was not at all disposed to allow him to do so. Sir Frederick never failed to warn his son against the vain blandishments of woman's society.

"If you must make love," he would write, "let it be the wife or the daughter of some man whose influence you desire, and whose intimacy will be of use to you; and let your love-making be of the most flimsy fabric—for marriage is as yet out of the question—you must win your spurs before you can wear them." It is perhaps but small wonder, with such a nature, and with such injunctions perpetually laid upon him, that Marcus Cunningham, at the age of twenty-eight, should never yet have fallen in love. Strange as this may appear, such indeed was the case. He had played at loving often, but he had never actually loved. Perhaps, indeed, he loved himself and his hopes too well, or perhaps his nature was somewhat too proud and too cold to be easily moved. As a rule, he paid very little attention to unmarried women—the wives of the men he esteemed and desired to stand well with, often came in for a large share of his notice—their daughters hardly ever.

It had been a new experience to him to find a sweet-faced girl in a white muslin dress, whose very name was strange, and whose family influence were unknown to him, seated on the other side to him at Lady Brabberstone's dinner-table. Afterwards Lord Brabberstone explained to him that the place had been destined for Lady Maxwell, but that upon the news of her unavoidable absence, his wife had, sooner than disarrange her whole table, substituted this little girl, their neighbour and cousin, for the absent lady. But at the time the fact of this girl's presence on his left hand had, from its very unexpectedness and novelty, impressed him in an unaccountable manner. Her perfect simplicity, the naïve innocence of her remarks, the tacitly implied equality and good-fellowship of her attitude to him, founded upon nothing on earth save a mutual possession of youth and good spirits, had had a singular effect upon him.

When the ladies had left the room, he had been for a space abstracted and dreamy, and then with almost an effort he had aroused himself, and had made an excellent after-dinner speech in response to the unanimous drinking of his health, after which he joined eagerly in an animated discussion upon all the leading topics of the day; but when at length he followed his host and the other guests into the picture-gallery, where all the younger people had assembled for dancing, his eyes, by an irresistible im-

pulse, flew instantly round the room in search of the little girl with the pathetic face, who had interested him so curiously at dinner-time.

Leaning back with folded arms against the dark oaken paneling, whilst discussing the details of to-morrow's programme with Lord Brabberstone, Marcus nevertheless kept his eyes fixed upon that slight radiant figure in white. She was standing up to dance a quadrille with Sir James Ingram. Her whole being was alive with delight. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed, her red lips were parted with smiles.

"She can never have been at a dance before in her life!" said Cunningham to himself as he watched her.

A couple of dances went by. There were about fifty people in the room. The neighbouring houses, filled for the elections, had sent a goodly contingent of men and maidens. The house party alone numbered some six or eight couples. Cunningham, as in duty bound, went forward and asked Rachel to dance. He found her, as usual, clever, self-possessed, and full of agreeable conversation; he had always liked her, yet, somehow, to-night she bored him, until by a sudden question she quickened all his pulses into life.

"How did you like my little cousin, Mr Cunningham? I saw you were good enough to talk to her at dinner."

"Your cousin?" He repeated the words with a slow consciousness. He knew very well who she meant; what, then, induced him to feign ignorance?

"Well, her father was mamma's second cousin, so perhaps I am stretching a point in calling her mine. I mean little Elizabeth Bertram, who sat on your left hand."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mr Cunningham, with a polite inclination of the head. He was surely not so eloquent as usual this evening.

Rachel said to herself that he had evidently utterly forgotten poor Elizabeth's existence. His next words disproved her assumption.

"Where does Miss Bertram live? What are her people and connections? Is she a native of Silshire, or a stranger?"

Rachel laughed, with a little surprise at the earnestness of the questions.

"Oh, poor little Elizabeth," she answered lightly, "she can hardly be credited with anything so serious as 'people' or 'connections.' She is only the child of a widow lady who lives in a poetical rose-garlanded house a mile off. A wasted house for you, Mr Cunningham, for there is not a voter within its walls."

Sir James Ingram was standing up again with Elizabeth. He could not waltz, he said; his waltzing days were over, but

he would like to talk to her. He seemed to take an interest in her; asked her about her life, and its pleasures and pursuits, for her mother's sake, Elizabeth supposed. Her little feet were beating time to the music, her eyes eagerly following the rapidly-rotating couples. Oh, what horrible waste of time it was at nineteen to be standing by talking to an old gentleman about the crops, and the prospects of the harvest, when one is at one's very first dance, and the Night Bells waltz is going on!

Then all at once somebody is standing in front of her asking her to dance, somebody who is tall and broad-shouldered, and whose very request is almost a command.

"Yes, go, my dear, go by all means," says Sir James good-naturedly, and Elizabeth is whirled away like a fluttering floweret into the throng.

He found that she could dance, and he took a pleasure in testing her powers to the uttermost; but when, after an unusually long turn, his own shortness of breath compelled him to make a pause in one of the corners of the long room, it was in the coolest voice in the world that Elizabeth said to him instantly,—

"I owe you an apology, Mr Cunningham, which I hope you will allow me to make to you."

"I fail to see why, Miss Bertram," he answered, smiling, and still rather breathless. "Although I shall be, of course, glad to hear anything you like to say."

"I did not know that you were—the—the Conservative candidate—"

"Naturally!—that was self-evident to me."

"And—I made foolish remarks about Members of Parliament generally."

"They were very disrespectful remarks; but then, as I am not a Member of Parliament, I will kindly overlook them." He was looking down at her with a delightful smile. "Is that all?"

"No; there is something far worse."

"Indeed? You alarm me! What is it?"

"I treated you—not as if you were the great and important person you are; I treated you as if—as if—you were just like myself—as if—we had been friends—just a boy and girl chattering nonsense together. I do not know what you can have thought of me."

His only answer was to pass his arm round her waist, and to launch her out again into the crowd of waltzers. Then as they were dancing, suddenly he bent his head, and whispered to her,—

"Dear little girl, if you knew how much good it does me to be treated like that, like a boy! I am so tired of being an im-

portant person. Will you go on treating me in that way, please? Shall we not be friends? I would like to be friends with you."

And then he pressed the little hand he held in his quite tight and hard, so that Elizabeth was out of breath this time, and leant back trembling like a fluttering leaf against the wall when next they stopped.

But, ah, what a happy evening it was! an evening to remember and to dream about long afterwards—an evening destined to stand out for ever in letters of red and gold in the calendar of her life!

Once again during those too swift and too happy hours did this king amongst men single her out from all the crowd of women to dance with him.

"You dance so well, Miss Bertram, I must have another turn with you," he had said simply, in that somewhat imperious fashion of his. And Elizabeth, lamb-like, threw over a pale youth to whom Lady Brabberstone had just introduced her, the son of a neighbouring parson, who was home from Cambridge, and obeyed him without a word.

And this time he assured her that he would come and see her, and that in the midst of the struggle that lay before him he would certainly not forget her, nor the bargain of friendship that had been struck between them.

But this second dance was not destined to pass unnoticed in high quarters.

Lord and Lady Brabberstone stood together for a moment at the end of the room.

"Surely there is Cunningham dancing again with little Elizabeth Bertram," said his lordship, putting up his gold-rimmed eyeglass as he looked down the room at the crowd of flying couples; "you had better stop it, Geraldine."

"I can't think what possesses the man!" replied Lady Brabberstone, with annoyance. "I wish I had not put her next him at dinner; but who on earth could have supposed that a man of that stamp would have found three words to say to a little country girl who knows nothing and nobody, yet there they were laughing and talking together for half the time, although Mrs Graves, whom he took down to dinner, is the biggest flirt in Belgravia!"

"You had better have put Rachel next to him, as I told you!" replied her lord.

"My dear, after Sir Frederick's letter, it would have been most unwise. Nothing scares a man off a girl so much as if he thinks she is thrust under his nose by design. It is all very

well for his father to write to us and suggest an alliance between our families, but I know Marcus Cunningham very little if he is not about the last man upon earth to submit to such an arrangement being planned and laid out for him without his knowledge. If he knew of his father's proposition, he would probably not speak to Rachel at all—"

"All the same, you needn't allow *that* to go on!" said Lord Brabberstone, designating with an expressive wave of his eye-glasses a certain happy-faced couple who just then whirled swiftly by them. "To begin with, he will turn the poor child's head, and it's a pity for her."

"Oh, yes; it can very soon be stopped," replied his wife lightly, and gave a swift order to a passing man-servant.

Then she made her way down the room, and the next time Marcus and his partner stopped to take a short rest, they found their hostess close behind them.

"So sorry, my dear child, to put an end to your pleasure, and to take you away from your partner, but it is getting late, and your dear mother will be anxious. I have ordered the brougham to take you home; it will be round in a minute, and you know that Lord Brabberstone does not like the horses kept waiting, so I fear I must tear you away, Elizabeth. Wish Mr Cunningham good-night, and run away quietly, like a good child. So good of you to dance with my little cousin, Mr Cunningham! I am sure it has been a great treat to her, and she is, I know, most grateful for your kindness to her."

When was a man, however good, however great, however high-minded, ever equal to such a situation as this? I am not indeed able to claim any very great or noble qualities for my hero, and yet he could be brave enough and eloquent enough at times, and he had certainly a share of talent and readiness sufficiently large to make him fully equal, had he chosen, to have turned the tables upon Lady Brabberstone. No doubt he could have done so easily had he pleased; no doubt he could have hastened to assure her that the pleasure was all his, and the kindness all Miss Bertram's; and no doubt, he could have offered Elizabeth his arm, and have declared his intention of escorting her to the brougham that was to take her away. But he did nothing of the sort: he only watched the flush of pain and shame that rose slowly in her fair face at Lady Brabberstone's words,—only saw the sweet lips droop, and the pathetic eyes fall sadly as she turned to obey in silence; saw it and said not a word!

"He might have stood up for me a little, and asked her to let me stop for one more dance!" the poor child said to herself

with a bursting heart, when he had just limply touched her hand in farewell, and she found herself at the door out of which she had been bidden to make her escape. And then she turned back to give one more look at the brilliant room and the wax-lights throwing strange gleams upon the family ancestors in their sombre dresses and heavy tarnished frames, and the merry crowd of dancers they looked so solemnly and sternly down upon; and she heard the music, and the laughter, and the tramping of the twinkling feet, and took one last glimpse at the man whose lightest word, had he but chosen to speak it, might have won for her another half-hour of all this. But Marcus Cunningham was not looking at her; he was only talking to Lady Brabberstone, quite eagerly and excitedly, as though her very existence were forgotten.

She closed the door softly behind her with a sigh. It was her first reading of that "Essay on Man" which all women are destined sooner or later to learn, and it was as puzzling an experience to her as it was a painful one. And yet, had she but known it, there was something to be said too for Marcus Cunningham.

He was a conspicuous man just now in East Silshire; his least word was reckoned of importance, and all his small actions liable to be commented upon and discussed. When he had heard Lady Brabberstone's voice behind him, and had gathered that she was sending Miss Bertram summarily away, he had pulled his wandering fancies together with an effort, and had acknowledged instantly that she was perfectly right in what she was doing.

She was a clever woman, and no doubt she had divined that this little unknown girl had somehow attracted him more than was quite wise or judicious. Of course it would never do; she was quite right; his attentions were due to so many other women in the room, from whom he expected support and active exertion during the forthcoming election; it was absurd that he should waste his time talking to a child who was a mere nonentity. Lady Brabberstone had only acted in a perfectly justifiable manner: he even felt grateful to her for her timely interference. And yet when upon his oddly straining ears there fell, above all the clamour and the music, the almost inaudible shutting to of a door, he did with an imperceptible start turn swiftly round, and there came upon him a cold sense of blank emptiness, and a chill of dissatisfaction, as if all the beauty and all the life had vanished suddenly away from the gay scene, out of that softly-closing door.

Then, at his hostess' suggestion, he walked across the room

and asked Rachel Brabberstone to dance, and in doing so he was vaguely conscious of bringing upon himself the approbation of every individual in the room.

It seemed in the fitting order of things that he and Rachel Brabberstone should be standing up together. She was so tall and stately, with so gracious a manner and so striking a figure,—a woman who would look well in diamonds at a Court ball, who was fitted to form and lead a “salon” of her own, and would know how to uphold in society a husband’s career in the throng of public life. Instinctively he knew that there was no waste of his time in lingering over-much in Rachel’s society. “What a handsome couple they make,” said more than one looker-on as they passed by, and once the words were heard by both of them, and brought a warm flush into Rachel’s handsome face, and Marcus turned and looked at her meaningly, and her eyes fell for a moment beneath his glance.

For the first time a completely new idea entered into his mind, and fired his brain, although it did not quicken the pulses of his heart.

“A man might do worse than marry Rachel Brabberstone,” he said to himself critically, as one discusses an abstract question that only concerns oneself remotely. “She will make a splendid wife, and I shall find her house a delightful one to go to! for of course she will be disposed of long before I can contemplate marriage in earnest; and no doubt Brabberstone destines her for a duke.”

“We will not leave off dancing yet,” said Rachel to him. “It is your last night of pleasure, Mr Cunningham, so let us prolong it. To-morrow the hard work will begin, and we shall be launched into the thick of the campaign—you will have no more time for frivolity. Do you know that I mean to get up early to go into Hamerton with you and papa?”

“How good of you—not really?”

“Yes, because I have my Primrose Dames to look up—you know that I am secretary to the Habitation—and we shall have to begin our canvassing in sober earnest. So let us dance to-night whilst we may.”

“I will dance till morning willingly, if I may dance with you,” he answered earnestly.

And so, long after Elizabeth Bertram was in bed dreaming broken dreams about a Byronic-faced young man who had asked her to be his friend, and had promised not to forget her, Marcus Cunningham was still dancing in the picture-gallery at the Castle; and, because the guests had mostly gone, and only the house-party remained, and because it seemed to be some-

how expected from him, and was certainly the most politic thing he could possibly continue to do, he was dancing still again and again with Rachel Brabberstone.

CHAPTER IV.

"THERE IS NOTHING LIKE YOUTH."

ELIZABETH was brushing out her mother's soft fine hair the following morning at about half-past eleven o'clock when the maid came into the room and announced that a gentleman was waiting below.

Elizabeth, who looked a little pale and dejected after her unusual dissipation of the night before, flushed up suddenly a bright rosy red, and her heart began to beat in an altogether foolish and unreasonable manner.

"A gentleman!" cried Mrs Bertram. "Great heavens! and I am not dressed! What is his name? Is that a card?—give it me at once, girl."

She snatched a card from the tray, and both mother and daughter read the name simultaneously.

"Sir James Ingram."

"You never told me he was coming this morning, Elizabeth!" cried Mrs Bertram angrily, turning round upon her; "did he say so?"

Elizabeth's cheeks were quite pale again now, and her heart had sunk down again as heavy as lead.

"Oh, yes; I remember he did say something about this morning, but I quite forgot to tell you," she faltered.

"And you never told me! Well, upon my word, I think you are the most selfish girl I ever heard of! Do you suppose I would have allowed you to dawdle about over my hair if I had known that Sir James was coming to see me? Here, give Dawks the brush quickly, and run downstairs to him, and say I am coming directly. Dear me! how your thoughtlessness has upset and flustered my poor nervous system!"

"I must just go and wash my hands, mamma!"

"Oh, wash them here! As if Sir James would care, or even look at you!—he is thinking of no one but me. Good gracious! do make haste, child; he will perhaps not stop, if he thinks I am not ready to see him!"

Thus adjured, Elizabeth got through her simple preparations very speedily, and ran downstairs.

She was glad on the whole that she had washed her hands,

when she found how eagerly Sir James took them both and pressed them between his own.

"How are you this morning, dear child?—none the worse for your dissipation, I can see. You look as bright as a rose, and as fresh as a daisy. Ah, after all, there's nothing like youth!"

"Mother wished me to say that she will be downstairs to see you in a few minutes; she is nearly ready," said Elizabeth, in her most practical manner, disengaging her hands almost forcibly from Sir James' grasp.

The intelligence did not seem to affect Mrs Bertram's old admirer profoundly. He continued to look at Elizabeth with eyes of the keenest delight and admiration.

"Is she?—then let us sit down and have a little talk. I want to know all about you, Elizabeth. I may call you so, may I not? I want to know what are your tastes and fancies,—how you spend your day,—what you do with yourself, in short."

Elizabeth laughed a little nervously. She found herself seated upon a sofa close to her visitor, in front of the windows. Seen in the full glare of the summer morning light, Sir James seemed even less juvenile than he had done in evening clothes under the softened radiance of last night's wax candles. His complexion was of a streaky red, like a ribstone pippin with a network of little crimson lines below the skin; his grey moustache and eyebrows failed to be poetically interesting, by reason of the bristling hairs that stuck out in both in an aggressive and unruly fashion; and his kind blue eyes were a little bit bloodshot in the whites, and had red rims to their eyelids. Last night Elizabeth had given him sixty years, this morning she put him down unhesitatingly for seventy. He was in reality somewhere half way between the two.

In answer to his somewhat embarrassing and comprehensive questions, Elizabeth replied that she had no particular occupations; and as to her tastes, they were all for amusing herself, she feared, only she very seldom got the chance.

"More's the pity then, my dear!" replied Sir James sympathetically. "Why shouldn't young things amuse themselves?—it is a most natural desire at your age. I was quite astonished to hear you say last night you had never been to a dance before. This really should be seen to."

"Mother was a beautiful dancer, was she not?"

"Beautiful, and a beautiful woman too—but there's nothing can stand against youth—nothing!"

"Mother will be very glad to see you again," remarked Elizabeth, once more striving to turn the conversation on to her mother instead of herself. "She has the warmest recollection—"

"Yes, yes! kind soul, I am sure she has!" interrupted her visitor. "But recollection of the past, my dear Elizabeth, what is it?—nothing, at best, but a saddened glance into a vase of faded rose leaves! Give me a living, breathing reality of youth and freshness, in exchange for the most glorious of all the perished memories that lie withering beneath the cerement cloths of five-and-twenty years ago!"

Elizabeth began to feel frightened. Had Sir James Ingram really gone off his head when her mother had so summarily dismissed him long ago in favour of her father? and had he remained slightly touched in the upper storey ever since? Would her mother's brown satin tea-gown, trimmed with coffee lace, which she was at this very moment so carefully donning upstairs, be regarded by her ancient admirer as nothing better than a "cerement cloth," when he should behold it?

Last night he had not talked to her so wildly and meaninglessly. Not only had his looks seemed younger, but his conversation had been simpler and more attractive; his manner that of an old gentleman who means to be kind to a young girl. Elizabeth had liked him fifty times better last night.

But then last night Sir James Ingram had not been full to the overflowing of a new idea which had come to him in the silent visions of the night. He had not, like a meteor flash from on high, been inspired with a wonderful and vivifying conviction—a conviction that when a man has been a widower for over thirty years; when he has knocked about every capital in Europe; when he has "seen life," as it is called, *i.e.*, steeped himself in pleasure of every kind, and under every aspect; when he has taken the edge off every enjoyment upon earth, and has thoroughly impaired the vigour of his constitution; then there is nothing finer or nobler or more satisfactory left for him to do with the remainder of his existence than to take to himself a young and absolutely innocent wife, and sun himself for the rest of his days in the sweetness of her freshness and her beauty.

This was the notion that had come upon him betwixt the night and the dawning of day. And who, he asked of himself, so well fitted to occupy this honourable position in his affections and his existence, as the charming young daughter of a lady whom a great many years ago he had desired to make his wife? Where could he find a fresher heart, a purer soul, a more absolutely virgin nature, than in Elizabeth Bertram? Other girls knew their own value too well, had seen life, had acquired aspirations and ideals of their own, but to Elizabeth the world was an unknown mystery. She wanted to live, to see pleasure, to feel the strong pulses of enjoyment throb through her veins.

Her very ignorance would make her an easy conquest. She could be won, if not through her heart, yet assuredly through her eager longing to plunge into that unknown existence of which he and his thousands a year would be able to open the doors for her.

Frankly, Sir James Ingram was in love with little Elizabeth Bertram, and it was as a wooer, undeclared as yet, but breathing an unspoken adoration, that he had sought her this morning. He was not therefore very rapturously delighted when the door was thrown open, and Mrs Bertram, in all the glories of her best tea-gown, with her fluffy hair piled up high above her forehead, and a strong odour of Ylang-Ylang, which came in with her in like manner as the Pillar of Cloud was said to accompany the Sacred Tabernacle in the Scriptures, in a very flood and torrent of fragrance, entered the room, and put an end to his *tête-à-tête*.

"Ah, my dear, dear old friend!" she cried, reaching out her hands to him.

Perhaps for one moment Sir James was in very truth and deed taken aback. She was so wonderfully well got up, so extraordinarily preserved, it took his breath away. But then Sir James was up to all this kind of thing—the bright spot of colour on either cheek, the carmine upon the lips, the whiteness of neck and brow, were unable to deceive him. Elizabeth honestly thought that it was excitement and pleasure that had effected that strange beautifying process upon her mother's faded face, but Sir James Ingram was an old hand—he knew better. Still it was well done, and he experienced a decided admiration for her.

"After all these years," cried Mrs Bertram, in a voice which faintly suggested emotion, "I see you once again! Ah, does it not make one's heart young once more, dear friend?"

"Yes; that is the worst of it, dear Mrs Bertram, as I was saying just now to your charming daughter. Our hearts are young enough, to be sure, but, alas! time takes so much away; and there's nothing like the freshness of nineteen, is there?"

Mrs Bertram collapsed somewhat nervelessly upon the sofa. It was not exactly the remark she had expected him to make. Elizabeth thought about the "cerements," and trembled. Perhaps the erring baronet was struck with a faint sense of his mistake, for he hastened to say,—

"How wonderfully well you are looking; how delightfully you remind me still of the lovely Miss Lanyers."

This was slightly better. Mrs Bertram smiled once more.

"Ah, dear Sir James! how much has taken place since those happy days!" she sighed.

"Much indeed!" replied the devoted man, rushing on to his doom. "The cruel years that have parted us so long have robbed us of so much, have they not? When I look at the face of this dear delightful child of yours, I say to myself,—Ah! youth, youth! there is nothing upon the face of the earth to be compared to youth!"

"Elizabeth," said Mrs Bertram, turning quite sharply round upon her daughter, "go away, my dear, and find some occupation for yourself; Sir James Ingram and I have many reminiscences of the past to discuss, to which we do not care to have a listener."

Elizabeth opened the French window, and vanished swiftly into the garden; and in spite of his absolute dismay at this unexpected manœuvre, Sir James found himself forced into a *tête-à-tête* with the love of his early youth. As for Elizabeth, she wandered away down the garden, not ill-pleased to be released; and five minutes after she had left the house, she had forgotten Sir James Ingram's very existence. Down the terrace steps, along the straight border path, where tall ascension lilies, stately and white, stood in a row against a background of sweetbriar hedge of tenderest green, and a tangled mass of more lowly flowerets, yellow nasturtiums and bunches of white pinks, dark-blue lupus and crimson snapdragon, and a long line of sober-tinted mignonette carpeted the earth in a tangled confusion at their feet. In the morning sunshine the lilies and the mignonette sent forth lavishly their strong perfumes into the hot air, the bees hummed busily by, and the saffron butterflies flitted from flower to flower, whilst Elizabeth—a flower herself—passed bareheaded amongst them all, with the glint of the sun upon her hair, and the blue of the heavens mirrored back in her dreaming eyes. But she thought not at all of the beautiful garden before her, nor of the flowers opening their hearts in the glad glow of the morning sun; all that she thought about was of a young man of Byronic aspect, who had said he would come to see her, and who for certain was not thinking about her now.

Beyond in the kitchen-garden old Adam Fenn was digging up an old asparagus bed, his round back doubled over his work, his bare sinewy arms and hands clutching the three-pronged fork with which he turned up the rich odorous soil, over which he bent and rose in mechanical regularity.

Elizabeth came and stood behind him, watching him silently. Adam was, in his way, a character. He had known her ever since she was what he called "a wee bit gurl," and he had managed the Lodge garden in his own fashion ever since she

could remember. At his own sweet will he digged and planted, grubbed up old beds, laid down new ones, sowed seeds, and bedded out according to his own personal views and fancies. Nobody gave him any orders; nobody gainsaid him; he did what he liked. He was "just gardener" at the Lodge, and had been so ever since Elizabeth was three years old, and he believed himself to be as much the owner of that garden as though the soil upon which he had laboured so long was in truth his very own.

"The laadies!" why, they were "just nawbody;" as long as they had a posy of flowers to put in their drawing-room—that was all they knew about gardening, poor silly things! Adam knew that upon himself alone rested the burden and responsibility of the acre under his charge; all he required was that he should be let alone to do his duty in his own way, and not "worrifuddled" by other people.

"What are you doing, Adam?" asked Elizabeth presently, after she had stood watching him for some minutes. A pause, during which Adam turned over two more clods of fresh brown earth, whose odour went up strong and sweet under her nostrils. Then he slowly uplifted his head, and looked at her. His face was like one of his own prize Magnum Bonum potatoes, rugged and knubbly, and of a uniform brown earth colour all over.

"I'm a groobin' up of t'awld sparrergrass bed—and am agoin' to mooock it fresh." Having delivered himself of the which remark, in the very finest East Silshire drawl, which it was possible to imagine, and which it is utterly impossible to transcribe, Adam returned to his digging, adding as an afterthought, when he had stuck his prong viciously into the earth once or twice more, "An' I should loike to know if ye are ony wiser naw than ye wur afore, missy?"

Elizabeth did not attempt to refute this withering sarcasm; she only observed mildly that it seemed hard work, and she wondered he didn't get the boy to help him.

The allusion to this individual was as a red rag to a bull, to the soul of Adam Fenn.

"Boayes! what's boayes?" he cried, with an angry snort, stopping short in his work and drawing himself up to his natural height. "Boayes is naw manner o' use in the wurd whaatsoever, let aloan a bit weedin' or sooch loike! If ye' gotten weark to do'a, ye do'a it yersel', saay Oi. Do'ant wa'ant naw boayes. What's boayes? nothin' but a parcel o' rawbbish!" and with an indignant spit into the palms of his horny hands, the old man fell to work again with redoubled energy.

But presently, as she stood silently watching him, perhaps

because he deemed that the situation demanded some further conversational effort on his part, or perhaps only because he was really fond of her, and at his secret heart enjoyed a talk with his young mistress, Adam looked up again, and rested his earth-stained arms across the handle of his spade.

"There's goin' to be foine graand doin's in 'Amerton, as I'm toald, along o' t' Elections," he observed.

The dreamy eyes looked up quickly at him with sudden interest.

"Indeed, Adam? What have you heard about it?"

"The towan be all clapped oaver wi' blue an' red poasters like a flower show; an' a lot o' idle hussies be goin' about wi' bundles o' traacts, a poakin' their noases into every house in the plaace."

"The Primrose Dames canvassing," murmured Elizabeth, below her breath.

"An' my son Will, missy—ye mind my son Will, as works for Maaster Groimes, t' blacksmith down Moile Green way?" Elizabeth intimated that she "minded" him. "Wa'll, Will he tells me as there's to be wha't they ca'all a Monster Ma-ass Meetin' to-morrow night in the 'Tcwan 'all, an' that chap as they ca'alls Cooningham is a-goin' to address the people."

"Oh, Adam," cried Elizabeth excitedly, whilst a little red spot blazed up in either cheek, "I do hope that you will vote for Mr Cunningham! Promise me that you will!"

"Miss 'Lizabeth!" replied the old man, with great solemnity, "whether I shall voate for Mister Cooningham or whether I shall not voate for 'im, that is a secret, miss, as lies betwixt me an' th' Almoighty."

This is a somewhat singular delusion that appears to be widely spread amongst voters included under the new Franchise Act. Elizabeth was quite abashed by the overwhelming gravity of the reproof, and knew not what to say. She felt indeed quite covered with shame, as one who has unwittingly and intrusively trodden under foot sacred and holy things. Her little attempt at canvassing in Marcus Cunningham's cause was absolutely and utterly crushed.

"Howsomenever," added Adam, after a pause, as though making a great and generous concession, "I shall goa an' hear 'un, I shall goa an' hear 'un. If so bea as Oi think 'un better nor Mister Snagg, Oi shall voate for 'un; if Oi think Mister Snagg a better ma'an than 'e, then Oi shall voate for Snagg," and Adam took up his fork again, as though this finally clenched the argument. Now Snagg was the Radical candidate, a local magnate connected with the principal hide and leather factory of the town.

"I trust and hope that Mr Cunningham's speech will convince you, Adam," she murmured humbly.

"T'aint 'is speech, 'tis 'is principles Oi look to," replied Adam impressively. "But, all ways, Oi shall go an' hear 'un. My son Will e's goin' to borrow a tax-ca'art he can get at Moile Green, an' e's a-goin' to call at my cottage at eight shaarp to-morrow noight."

"Oh, Adam!" cried Elizabeth, with a sudden eagerness, "how much I wish I could go with you!"

"You, missy—what, in a tax-cart wi' Will an' me?—haw! haw! haw!" and Adam fairly laughed aloud at the absurdity of the notion. But Elizabeth did not laugh at all; her heart was beating and her eyes shone.

"Oh, but I really mean it, Adam—really and truly! I would like so much to hear Mr Cunningham speak; and I could sit in the back of the cart, behind you and your son, and you would take care of me. Oh do, do take me!"

"Why, whaatever would your mawmaw say, missy?" cried Adam, in much amazement.

"Mother need never know. I could slip out after tea. I often go out; and she has her nap, and never asks what I do. And I could wrap myself up in a long cloak, and wear an old hat, so that nobody would see me; and I would wait for you outside in the lane. Oh, dear, kind Adam, do, do take me!"

"But we're a-goin' to waa'lk hoam, missy! we can't get the ca'art both ways," urged poor Adam, fairly driven into a corner by his young lady's vehemence.

"Well, and so can I walk home! what is three miles to me, Adam? I should enjoy walking home, positively enjoy it!"

Adam, ousted from his very last argument, was reduced to scratching his head in a helpless fashion, as he eyed his young lady with a perplexed thoughtfulness. Then Elizabeth seized her vantage ground, as women know instinctively how to do, and pressed both her little white hands upon the bare brown hairy earth-clotted arms. "Dear, dear Adam! please take me!" she urged, with her sweet pleading face turned up within six inches of his nose. What man, of whatever age, of whatever station, could have resisted her? Who, with a man's heart within him, could have stood proof against her winsomeness?

Adam Fenn was unable to do so.

A slow sheepish smile stole over his broad face; the corners of his mouth elongated themselves at an upward angle; the wrinkles about his eyes puckered themselves up into innumerable folds; he resembled a beneficent earth-gnome beaming upon a fairy child.

"Bless your purty fa-ace!" he murmured; "in counrse you'll do as you loike, missy!" And so his consent was given, and the matter was settled; and Elizabeth, having got what she wanted, went away, womanlike, after her own affairs, whilst Adam returned to his digging in a chastened and lamb-like frame of mind.

Presently Sir James came out of the house on to the terrace-walk and looked about him rapidly in every direction. He was quite plainly to be seen as he stood there in the full large of the sunshine from every nook and corner of the garden; but there was a small culprit crouching down close under the shelter of the sweetbriar hedge, upon whom the worthy baronet's eager glances failed to rest, so still did she keep, and so effectually did the fragrant boughs droop over her hiding-place.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" called out Sir James Ingram softly, but she answered him never a word.

Only the birds twittered, and the butterflies fluttered by, and a myriad of summer insects hummed and buzzed in the warm noonday air.

Then Sir James Ingram walked slowly away, and when he was quite gone away out of sight, naughty Elizabeth crept laughing out of her bower of greenery.

CHAPTER V.

IN HAMERTON TOWN HALL.

MARCUS CUNNINGHAM was about to address the electors of East Silshire for the first time. For two days Lord Brabberstone and he had been driving about the country in a mail phaeton. They had visited outlying districts, villages, and hamlets,—had pulled up at every farm-house, and had exchanged friendly greetings with every publican upon the road. Marcus had also been to all his committee rooms, and had interviewed many doubtful supporters, and several acrimonious and inveterate adversaries.

It was quite late in the afternoon of the second day when, covered with dust and mud, the phaeton clattered noisily up the stone-paved High Street of the town of Hamerton, and turned in at the low archway of the courtyard of the Green Dragon. Here, a crowd had assembled to give him a hearty cheer as he went by, and he made him self extremely popular by immediately standing up in the carriage and shouting out,—*"I hope I shall see you all to-night, my friends."* The words were nothing, but the handsome young face and the beaming smile, and the un-

covered head, with its clustering locks, all went a long way in his favour, and a second ringing cheer answered him back from over a hundred throats.

After which Lord Brabberstone and he dined together in a private room at the Green Dragon, waited upon by the obsequious landlord, and by eight o'clock, after a brief rest and a change of toilet, they were ready to proceed to the Town Hall, outside which a patient crowd had been long assembled, in order to make a rush for the best places as soon as the doors should be opened.

Meanwhile Lady Brabberstone and the ladies at the Castle who wished to be present at the meeting had spent a quiet day, and were ready, after an early dinner, to drive over to the places that had been reserved for them on the platform.

"Could we not take Elizabeth with us?" Rachel had said to her mother, earlier in the day. "I think it would be a pleasure to her to go, and we can easily make room for her in the barouche. If you and Lady Lorton go in the brougham, there will only be myself and Mrs Amberly, and Sir James and Miss Weston in the barouche. We could very well squeeze Elizabeth in between us, she is so small."

But Lady Brabberstone did not encourage this idea at all.

"I cannot see anything to be gained by Elizabeth's going," she answered coldly. "She cannot possibly understand anything about politics, and it is only unsettling her mind, and unfitting her for her position in life, to take her about as if she were one of us."

Now this speech was not at all like Lady Brabberstone, for she was a good-hearted and generous-minded woman, and, as a rule, she enjoyed showing little kindnesses to those whose position in the world was less prosperous than her own. Elizabeth, too, had a claim—that of relationship—upon her, and she had, moreover, always been a favourite with her. Rachel opened her eyes so wide at her mother's words, that Lady Brabberstone felt bound to give some explanation in answer to the mute and astonished reproach which they expressed.

"The fact is, I think Marcus Cunningham has just that kind of fascinating manner that might very likely be misinterpreted by a girl who has seen nothing at all of the world and of men. It would be a pity, would it not, to throw her unnecessarily in his way?"

"Do you mean to say that Mr Cunningham was unduly attentive to her the other night?" inquired Rachel, with a slightly heightened colour.

"Oh, no, no, my dear!" cried Lady Brabberstone emphatically, her own colour rising too in an unaccustomed manner;

"how you do run away with ideas! There was nothing of the kind, only I feel that Elizabeth is young and impressionable, and her mother is of no use as a protector; it is only on her account, poor child, that I think it best to be prudent. Mr Cunningham, you know, talked a good deal to her at dinner-time, and danced with her in the evening. That, from a man of his importance, to say nothing of his charm of manner, which is unconscious, and quite natural to him, might very easily turn a little country girl's head, and I happen to know that his father has decided, and very different views for him."

Rachel was silent. She understood her mother's meaning perfectly well—what London-bred young lady of three-and-twenty would not have done so? She became suddenly thoughtful. Whether or no her own views would ultimately coincide with Sir Frederick Cunningham's on the subject of his son's future, was as yet uncertain, but in any case, the idea was by no means new to her. She was perfectly well aware that as a match it would be an eminently suitable one. Her ambitions would be gratified, her position in this world be a secure and enviable one. As a man, Marcus attracted her by his talent and the breadth of his aspirations. In him she would find "a help meet for her," one whose mind and whose intellect were on a level with her own. There was a community of thought betwixt them, a sympathy of views, a harmonious blending of opinions and judgments, which argued well for future happiness, should he ever become her husband. But she was not in love with him. She had no delusions whatever upon that point. It might be a very desirable thing that she should marry him, but if her choice were made in his favour, it would be a deliberate one, and no element of passion or romance would enter into it. Nevertheless, a woman's natural instinct forbade her to press the question of Elizabeth's coming with them that evening. Her mother was always wise and right; it would, no doubt, be, as she had said, better not.

So when the party of ladies from Brabberstone Castle made their way up the narrow gangway at the crowded Town Hall, there was no little Elizabeth Bertram amongst them.

Marcus discovered this fact almost more quickly than it has taken to write it down. He looked out for her,—he could not tell why or wherefore, but undoubtedly he looked out for her. He had not thought about her much certainly since last he had seen her, yet when he heard the cheers and the little commotion that heralded Lady Brabberstone's arrival at the Town Hall, he was distinctly anxious to see her, and decidedly disappointed to find that she was not there.

"I suppose I don't interest her sufficiently!" he said to himself a little savagely. Then Lady Brabberstone came up on to the platform, and he went forward to speak to her and to Rachel; and as soon as the rustle of their skirts had settled down, Lord Brabberstone, as chairman, rapped upon the table, cleared his throat, and stood up and began his speech, and then Marcus forgot all about Elizabeth and her absence.

Far away down the hall a shabbily-dressed girl sat closely wedged in upon one of the narrow wooden benches, between old Adam Fenn, in his best black Sunday coat, and a large woman in a checked red shawl. Adam did his very best to make as much room for her as he could, but the more space he gave her, by crushing himself up against his son Will, who sat beyond him, the more did the lady in the red shawl encroach upon her from the other side. Not only did this individual seem to delight in attempting to oust her altogether from her seat, by giving a succession of little jumps and jerks of her whole heavy person, each one beaving down upon her more determinately than the last, but also she frequently glared round upon her victim with infuriated and angry eyes, as though to express her indignation that she should dare to be sitting next her, or indeed that she presumed to have any existence at all, and every time she scowled upon her, Elizabeth was conscious of a strong whiff of gin, which emanated inodorously from her whole portly form.

But in spite of these trials and discomforts, Elizabeth was supremely happy and intensely excited. In point of fact she was almost unconscious of the onslaughts and assaults of her neighbour, as well as of the young gentleman who kicked the leg of the bench behind her, and the elderly one, who would lean back almost on to her lap, immediately in front of her. She saw nothing, felt nothing, thought of nothing, but of the man upon the raised platform at the end of the hall; her whole being was absorbed in watching him, and when he rose slowly to his feet, with one hand resting upon his hip and the other upon the table beside him, when cheer after cheer rang wildly through the hall, and when at length, amidst an absolute silence, his first words rang forth softly yet clearly from end to end of that vast assemblage, her heart beat with such an intensity of concentrated feeling that its throbbing was almost a physical pain to her.

Now as this does not profess to be a political novel, but only the history of a foolish girl who loved a man whose lines were cast in the thick of the political arena of his country. it is not

in Hamerton Town Hall on that eventful evening. It was duly reported and printed in every local paper of the county, as well as in many of the London ones, the following morning. It made, owing, in some measure, perhaps, to the catastrophe in which the meeting ended, a considerable stir at the time, and it can be read now, no doubt, by such eager politicians as care to hunt up from the archives of the past what were Marcus Cunningham's professions of political faith at that early period of his career.

There was a good deal in it about the Fusion, in antithesis to the Severance of classes, and about the absolutely fatal and mischievous results of the latter pernicious doctrine. There was a good deal, too, about the mutual dependence of man one upon the other, and a great deal more about the great cause of the Union, which every true and free-born Englishman, by virtue of his nationality, was bound to support. But it was not so much in the matter as in the manner of it that Cunningham's speech was great. He was an orator born—he held his hearers rapt and breathless—his enthusiasm communicated itself to his audience. His voice, sweet in tone and low in its modulations, could nevertheless be heard with absolute distinctness in every corner of the vast hall. He had a rare gift of mastering the attention of the masses, by the power of his own will, and by the individuality and force of his own spoken thoughts. There was no gainsaying or denying his eloquence: it bore everything before it in an overwhelming flood of conviction. He spoke without hesitation, and with scarcely a gesture, and yet the very slightest movement of his hand told with unerring effect; his face, whilst he was speaking, became pale with excitement, whilst his eyes were illumined with an almost unearthly fire. Perhaps the chief secret of his power lay in the fact that he was himself absolutely carried away by his own enthusiasm,—that he *believed* in what he advocated, from the very depths of his own soul.

Afterwards Elizabeth, understanding but very little of the subject which he spoke about, and having but an imperfect comprehension of the great social and political questions which he dwelt upon, could nevertheless have repeated whole phrases and sentences of that speech, so deeply did those cutting fiery words impress themselves upon her mind.

For a long time the audience hung thus breathless upon the words of the speaker, and nothing happened to disturb the flow of his eloquence—nothing at least that did not stimulate rather than repress him in his course. "Hear, hear!" frequently repeated on every side, sometimes deepening into an actual burst of applause; rough sticks rapped approvingly upon the wooden

floor ; voices that cried out now and again in homely fashion, "Right ye are, sir !" "Ah, that's the ticket for us !" "You're the chap for Silshire !" Groans at the mention of the Grand Old Man, and even a subdued hiss now and again from a distant corner, quickly quenched, however, by scores of eager champions. All this is rather a help than a hindrance to an orator who understands how to speak to a mixed concourse of his fellow-men.

For forty minutes or more there was no other disturbance than these, and it seemed as if the meeting were destined to be what the reporters call an immense success, and to end as it had begun in unbroken peace and harmony. Fate, however, had other issues in store.

Just as Cunningham's speech was nearing to its end, just as he was uttering the first few sentences of what might possibly have been a remarkably fine peroration, there arose far away in the corner immediately behind Elizabeth, a dull broken murmur of sound, that gathered strength and importance at every instant, until it deepened into a continuous roar. Quite at the back of the hall a small body of men had sat silent and sullen during the proceedings ; neither cheers nor groans had passed their lips, nor had they broken into any of those curious inarticulate sounds of disapproval which recall more forcibly the baying of wild beasts than any sound that human throats are wont to produce under the ordinary influences of life. These men—a small compact body who had come in quietly, and taken their places without disorder or confusion—had as yet uttered no sound that could in any way denote the bend of their convictions. They were biding their time.

And their time had now come. There was a small side door intended to be locked from within, behind them ; but at a given signal one of their party quietly slipped the bolts and turned the key, and the door immediately was pressed inwards by a dense crowd of men who had been waiting outside. In a moment all was uproar and wildest confusion ; a great stream of men, all of the roughest and lowest class, poured through the narrow opening into the hall, literally bearing down before it the masses of peaceful occupiers of it who were seated upon the benches. Screams of terror, shouts of indignation, yells of desperation, arose on every side. Men fought hand-to-hand battles with they knew not whom ; women were cast down and trampled upon. A howl of fear and agony went up from a thousand throats, and that terrible demon which we call Panic—a demon that once seen is never again forgotten—was let loose, with all its fiend-like terrors, upon the Town Hall of Hamerton. Those who were nearest to the platform fled pell-mell in a rush

towards it. Women were dragged up fainting and bruised upon its haven of comparative safety. There was a crash of the breaking up of benches and chairs, and heartrending cries, and prayers for mercy, mingled hoarsely with the groans and sobs of the injured.

At the very first outburst of the tempest, Lord Brabberstone and the gentlemen upon the platform, foreseeing what was likely to happen, hurried the ladies precipitately away through a small back door and staircase which fortunately opened at the end of the building behind the platform. Here, flying across the road by ones and twos, or in groups clinging to one another, the "gentry and aristocracy" took refuge in a grocer's shop, which opened its doors hospitably to receive them, and then straightway put up its shutters to defend its distinguished fugitives. Lady Brabberstone sank down upon a chair in violent hysterics; Miss Weston very nearly swooned away; several other ladies had had their clothes torn nearly off their backs, and all were trembling and shaking with terror; Rachel alone was quiet and composed, and went from one to the other soothing and calming their agitation as best she could.

"Let us get the ladies away as quickly as we can," she heard her father say to one of the gentlemen. "Get out by the back of the house, and go round to the Dragon stables and have the horses put to at once. Then we had better all follow you. We can walk round by River Lane; there will be no crowd there. We shall be able to get the ladies out quietly enough that way."

Two or three men volunteered immediately to go off on this mission. Lord Brabberstone and Sir James Ingram were to remain in charge, and bring on the rest after an interval of ten minutes. Then Rachel noticed that Marcus Cunningham was standing by the front shop door by which they had come in, whilst the grocer was unfastening the bolts and chains, in order to let him out.

Quick as thought Rachel slipped round and stood beside him.

"You are not going back again?" she asked, fixing her dark eyes eagerly upon him.

"I think so," he answered quietly, not looking at her.

"Not back to the Hall, surely?" she cried. "Oh, for God's sake, do not think of such a thing! There can be no occasion for such a self-sacrifice. You will be torn in pieces—you can do no good—you will only risk your life!"

"That's what I says, miss," here broke in the grocer, who was a staunch Conservative. "'Tain't no sort of use to get

dragged about in a crowd like that; and Silshire can't afford to run no risks with Mr Cunningham, nor the country neither."

Nevertheless the bolts were drawn back, and the door stood ajar. Marcus looked from one to the other of his advisers with a smile.

"Thank you very much, Miss Brabberstone, and you too, Goodman, for your kind anxiety for my safety, but I assure you that I shall be running no sort of risk. I will take good care of myself, and I think you must both see that there is a chance that my voice and my influence may quiet the disturbance, and that, in any case, it is certainly my duty to go back and make the effort to do so." And then his eyes met Rachel's fully, and he added,—“You would be the first, were I to take your advice and hold back, to say of me that I was nothing but a poor-spirited coward.” And then he stepped out of the door into the street and was gone.

“He be wrong, he be wrong!” reiterated the worthy grocer with much concern. “He'll do not a halfp'worth of good, and he'll get himself in a row—he be wrong to go.”

“No, Goodman,” answered Rachel quietly, “it is we who are wrong. Mr Cunningham was perfectly right to go.”

And she went back to her mother's side, to await amongst the rest of the women for her father to give the signal for their departure. She was very thoughtful and very anxious, and she sat holding her mother's hand in absolute silence, her handsome face grave and serious with the many perplexities of her mind.

She respected Marcus Cunningham from the bottom of her heart; she felt that he was a man indeed, in the truest and highest sense of the word; she was proud of him, of his eloquence and his courage, of his high sense of duty, of his sublime disregard of personal danger, but even as she thought of it all, there was a consciousness of incompleteness about it and about herself.

“If I were a love-sick girl,” she said to herself, with a sort of anger at her own insensibility, “I should not feel as I do now; my heart would beat; I should be torn in sunder with fears and terrors; it would be utterly foolish, but it would be sweet too to own to such a foolishness!”

And then there came before her the vision of another face,—of blue eyes that opened themselves wide with sudden pleasure or with swift regret, with sensitive features that told of every passing feeling within,—the vision of a poor young fellow struggling bravely upwards against the stream of life, unknown

unheeded in the world in which she herself was so secure and so safe. "If it were he!" her heart cried out, with a strange and sudden pain; and then the quick rush of shame to her face quenched back the unspoken words sternly and angrily, but not before a wild throb had answered back to the unbidden thought, with a pang of keenest agony at the bare suggestion of her riotous imagination. And yet what on earth had this poor struggling unknown young man to do with the Honourable Rachel Brabberstone, Lord Brabberstone's indulged and only daughter?

Meanwhile Marcus Cunningham was standing once more upon the half-ruined platform in the Town Hall—his presence was the signal for renewed cheers, as well as for renewed howls of derision and defiance.

Bare-headed and defenceless, he stood forward, striving in vain to make his voice heard above the tumult.

Yet, as a matter of fact, the worst of the storm was over, and the tide was on the turn. A horrible tragedy had poured a rush of cold water upon the wild and infuriated men, and had sobered them suddenly from little less than wild beasts back into human beings.

For a woman had been trampled to death! In the face of this awful fact, political rancour was fain to subside, and party feeling died away into shame and contrition. For a mob is a strange composite creature—gifted with an elephantine power in its aggregate form, with a huge and resistless rage, with a blind and unreasoning disregard of consequences, which, when united and compact, makes it one of the most terrible as well as the most powerful of human forces. But let the atoms fall away but ever so little from one another, let but some breeze of disuniting power blow them asunder the one from the other, and what then is left of the hydra-headed monster that was lately so formidable? Only a collection of poor working men, some of them idle, some of them drunken, but most of them honest, many of them tender-hearted, and all of them easily swayed, whether to evil or to good, by the home influences of their daily lives.

So it happened to the mob at the Hamerton Town Hall. A woman—one of themselves—a mother of little children—one such as were their own wives at home—hard working and poorly clad, had been knocked underfoot, and done to death by their mad outburst of senseless rage and fury! And when this terrible thing came to be realised, then a great hush fell upon them all. Then one called aloud—"Shame! shame!" and another and another took up the cry of indignation, until a

mighty roar of grief and dismay went up from about the spot where the dead woman lay.

Then, to turn the tide still further, at this juncture a strong body of police arrived. By their orders the great double doors at the further end of the hall were flung widely open to the night air, and almost simultaneously the fortuitous arrest of two or three of the ringleaders brought a sudden and most wholesome desire for flight into the minds of the remainder.

There was a rush for the doorway ! The greater portion of the assembly fled precipitately, and dispersed itself as quickly as might be into the darkened streets—a revulsion of feeling had come upon them all, and the riot was virtually at an end.

CHAPTER VI.

A BROKEN LIMB.

It was at this moment that Marcus Cunningham, standing alone upon the platform, caught sight of an old man staggering with difficulty towards him through the swiftly-diminishing crowd, bearing in his arms the inanimate form of a woman who had evidently fainted.

The old man, whose clothes were torn and disordered, was pale with terror and dismay, and being by nature a brown-complexioned man, his pallor was of a dull and ghastly copper-coloured hue. He fixed his eyes with a despairing appeal for help in them upon the solitary figure of the young man upon the deserted platform, and as he came towards him he tottered, and nearly fell beneath his burden.

Cunningham sprang forward to his assistance. As he did so, he was dimly aware that some missile, probably a broken chair leg, flung by a retreating enemy, struck him upon the forehead, and that a spurt of blood trickled forth from the wound, but so intent was he upon reaching the struggling old man that he was scarcely conscious of the incident, and speedily forgot it.

In the next moment he had taken the unconscious girl in his arms. She was wrapped in a dark and somewhat shabby ulster, her hat was beaten down over her brows, her long hair, loosened in the struggle, flowed dishevelled over her shoulders. He could not see her face, in fact, he did not even look at it, all his thought was to get her safely out of the awful scene of tumult and chaos about her. He lifted her out of the old man's arms; she was very slight, a mere feather-weight, that lay quite still and unconscious across his breast.

"Come this way," he said to the old man, whom he saw at a glance to belong to the labouring classes; "follow me close; there is a door behind the platform; I can carry her out that way."

Behind it, and between it and the door of the street, was a short stone passage lighted by a gas jet, beneath which was a rough bench; and here, finding how utterly unconscious and motionless she was, Cunningham laid his burden gently down. The old man was weeping and wringing his hands.

"For the love of God, sir," he cried distractedly; "doan't ye sa-ay she be dead!"

The thought had already gone through his own mind.

"Get out through that door; fetch a doctor—there's one four or five doors off, on the other side of the road—Doctor Greene, close to the first gas lamp—bring him as quickly as ever you can; or his assistant, or some one from the chemist's shop at the corner. Don't lose a moment; you'll do no good for your daughter by weeping and wailing, my poor fellow; go as quick as you can; I will stop with her."

Marcus was left alone with the unconscious girl. He tried to place her more comfortably upon the hard narrow bench, raising her head against his shoulder; then he unfastened her hat, and loosened the strings of her cloak. Her head fell back helplessly upon his bosom, and then he saw her face. The light of the gas jet fell full upon it. She was pale as death itself; her dark lashes lay in a shadow against her cheeks, great blue circles surrounded her closed eyes, and the veins upon her forehead stood out with appalling distinctness against the cream white of her skin, whilst her pretty lips were parted, and were of a livid whiteness.

Changed—altered out of all knowledge as she seemed to be—yet he recognised her at a glance. "Oh, my God!" burst in a low groan from his trembling lips, as he bent in agony over her, for in that moment he believed that she was dead.

The full significance of her being here came upon him like a revelation. Lady Brabberstone had not chosen to bring her, and so she had come by herself to hear him! And it had cost her her life!

That was what he thought as he bent over her in so mortal an anguish that it seemed even at that moment to him that he had never suffered anything like it on earth before.

"Oh, Elizabeth, my dear little girl, my poor child, my dear little friend!" he cried aloud in his distraction, "oh, do not die! Let me see your eyes once more, your sweet eyes; do not close them for ever!" and scarcely knowing what he did,

he bent over her and kissed again and again the cold cheek that lay so still and white against his arm.

And then, recalled from the borderland of death perchance by that appeal, by those kisses, by that breath of true regret and love that was breathed upon her pallid face, with a long shivering sigh that trembled flutteringly upon her lips, Elizabeth's eyes slowly opened, and, all heavy and misty, like violets washed in evening dews, they rested, with no consciousness within their drowsy depths, upon those that were bent upon her with such a passionate anguish of longing and sorrow. Softly the colour crept back to her lips and to her cheeks, and a little smile came hovering down upon her fair face.

She did not appear surprised or puzzled to find herself resting against Marcus Cunningham's shoulder—not for the first few seconds, at least—only a delightful sense of peace and rest seemed to be upon her.

"So it was not a dream!" she whispered; and then all at once recollection came back to her, the colour flew in a flame into her face, and she wrenched herself out of his arms.

"Oh, what has happened?—where am I?" she cried, looking at him with startled eyes; then she realised suddenly what had happened, where she was, and who was with her, and made an effort to struggle to her feet; but leaning unwarily upon her left arm, she turned white to the lips, and sank back again with a groan of pain.

"For Heaven's sake, keep still!" he murmured. "You are hurt!"

She was forced to obey him, and presently her eyes opened again, and dilated with horror as they fixed themselves upon his face.

"Oh, but you—*you* are hurt!" she cried, with uncontrollable emotion. "You are wounded in the forehead. I entreat you to leave me—I shall do very well!"

"It is nothing. I had forgotten it!" he said, passing his hand lightly over the scratch. "Dear child, don't look so unhappy," he added, in a whisper, bending down over her so closely and tenderly that his lips all but touched the soft hair that had fallen loosely away from its fastenings. How sweet it was, he thought; how strangely happy he was with this poor little pale girl in his arms; how delightful to watch the shadows of anxiety and confusion—ay, and of love itself, course themselves in quick and unconscious succession across the sweet face that was so near to his own.

Will anything that life can bring to him give back to

Marcus Cunningham any joy so new, so strange, so entrancing as this ! Dimly he realised in those few brief moments that all the hopes and aspirations of his existence were but poor tawdry things compared to this one grasp of earth's truest and best happiness,—that ambition is but a mean gilded toy of man's invention, but that love is God-given and divine. But Elizabeth's happiness was overshadowed in a very practical manner by actual physical pain. Once more an unguarded movement sent a sharp stinging agony through her arm, and a sick faintness descended once again upon her whole being. And then she saw faintly through a mist old Adam Fenn and the doctor coming through the door into the narrow passage, and behind him Lady Brabberstone, looking flustered and agitated, with her bonnet and its ostrich plumes awry, and a curious look of mingled surprise and displeasure in her face.

"Oh, she will be very angry with me !" thought poor Elizabeth, and that was the last thing she did think for a very long time, for at that moment Dr Greene began to manipulate her broken arm, and she fainted dead away from the pain, and went straight off into some odd borderland of unconsciousness, where angry looks and bewilderingly tender ones are alike merged in a sublime nothingness. Elizabeth was carried home to her mother's door, in the Brabberstone family coach ; she remembered nothing of the journey back, and very little of what happened afterwards. She was put to bed, and Doctor Fairgrave, whom she detested, came and set her left arm, which was broken and badly cut about the elbow, and strapped it up in splints ; after that she was light-headed for twenty-four hours, and only partially conscious at recurring intervals of the fact that her mother was bemoaning over her in her own unique and peculiar manner.

Who would have believed that such a trial would be sent to her ? groaned Mrs Bertram, in audible tones by her sick daughter's bedside,—that an only child would cause to her widowed mother such a shock to her nervous system, and would bring so much worry and anxiety to her already shattered constitution ?

"It's the very worst thing for me—it really is, Dr Fairgrave ! Have you not often told me that anything like worry is quite fatal to me ? and now I am utterly upset and unnerved by this extraordinary conduct of Elizabeth's."

"My dearest Mrs Bertram," cried Dr Fairgrave, stopping short in his task of bandaging his patient's arm, to press the hand of his patient's mother fondly, "pray be calm ! It certainly is most vexatious and trying for you ; but you must

not give way, dear friend, you must try and bear up ; remember your own precarious and precious health."

"I do, I do remember it constantly, Doctor," replied the lady ; with fervour and perfect veracity.

A groan from the bed recalled Dr Fairgrave to the immediate object of his visit ; he bent his broad unctuous face once more over poor Elizabeth's injured limb whilst her mother kept up an undercurrent of self-compassion in the background.

"Of course, it's very sad that the child has broken her arm, especially if that cut is going to leave a scar, and ruin her appearance in short sleeves for life ; but really when a young lady goes off like that in company with common people, without her mother's leave, in order to mix with a nasty dirty crowd of roughs, we can't pity her for the natural consequences of her vulgar tastes. It is I, her unfortunate mother, whom the world will pity the most, and who will suffer the longest from her unladylike outbreak. Don't you think so, Doctor ?"

"Indeed I do, dear lady."

And then Elizabeth became so feverish and delirious that even Dr Fairgrave was obliged to suggest that her mother should leave her to the care of the housemaid, and cease to disturb her child's sick-room with her reproaches and complaints.

During these days of sickness, frequent inquiries came from the big house to the little one after the invalid. Every morning the powdered footman solemnly presented himself at the front door with her ladyship's love, and she would be glad to know what kind of a night Miss Bertram had passed ; and every evening one of the grooms came round upon the same errand. Grapes and jellies were also conveyed to her from the same source, and some famous chicken tea from the castle kitchen, for which the cook had a special notoriety.

Then of course Rachel herself came over once or twice, and as soon as Elizabeth's feverish symptoms had somewhat abated, she was admitted to her friend's room, and came stealing softly in to talk to her, and to sit with her.

But no inquirer was more assiduous in his attentions, and more fervent in his anxiety, than was Sir James Ingram.

Early and late Sir James came over to Mrs Bertram's cottage, with a long, anxious face, and endless questionings concerning the precise condition of the invalid.

Mrs Bertram always saw this inquirer herself. To listen to her pretty little sighs and low-toned words, and to watch the melancholy upon her puckered brow, and the sad downward droop of the lips that were so like, and yet so unlike Elizabeth's,

you would indeed have thought that her fond maternal heart was rent in sunder by her anxiety concerning her child.

It is a fact that Sir James firmly believed that Mrs Bertram sat up every night with her daughter, and that she nursed her herself with assiduous and unremitting care. He was impressed with admiration for her devotion, and with sympathy for her anxiety; whereas Mrs Bertram was on her side firmly convinced that her old admirer was still madly enamoured of her, and that he only made Elizabeth's accident the pretext for his daily visits.

"Poor fellow!" she would say to herself, with a gentle sigh, as she watched him go away down the little drive, and out at the white painted gate into the road; "it is evidently the same with him as it used to be! I can see his love for me has never changed or altered! That is the odd thing about me,—men always did, and always will, love me so desperately, so unalterably. Once loved, I am loved for ever! Heigho! shall I ever cease breaking these poor fellows' hearts? It is a terrible responsibility which beauty sets upon us women!"

But Sir James was thinking of nobody but of Elizabeth.

All these days, although every one else sent to inquire after her, Marcus Cunningham alone made no sign or token that he was interested in her welfare. When Elizabeth was well enough to question those about her, that was the first thing that she made it her business to ascertain; but, alas! in vain did she put searching queries to the housemaid, and her mother's maid, and even to her mother herself, upon this to her all-important point. Lord and Lady Brabberstone had sent to inquire for her, Rachel and Sir James came daily to the house, other friends and neighbours sent flowers and fruits and all sorts of kind and sympathising messages, but Marcus Cunningham never once seemed to remember her existence.

"He despises me!—he thinks I was bold and unwomanly to go, and he detests me for having made myself conspicuous!" thought the poor child to herself, and slow tears welled out of her pretty sad eyes and trickled down one by one in a melancholy procession upon her pillow. And yet—could she ever forget his face when her senses had returned to her, or the look in his eyes when she had come back to life to find them gazing into hers? Ah! what had he meant by those looks of anxiety mingled with adoring worship? and why had he called her "his dear child"? and was it all a dream, a delusion of her fevered fancy, that just ere she returned to the world and its realities, from that dreamland of unconsciousness, some touch of magic, that was warm and soft, had thrilled through

her veins, bringing back her scattered senses into the vivid realisation of a happiness almost too sublime to be true? Could it have been indeed a delusion that Marcus Cunningham had kissed her?

If not? Then surely he had repented him of the moment of weakness, and by now, no doubt, he only hated and despised her for having beguiled him unawares into the display of an emotion which was certainly unworthy of so great and clever a man as he was.

Thus Elizabeth reasoned with herself as she lay upon her bed, and the depressing nature of her own arguments and deductions may not improbably have retarded her recovery.

"I wish I could die!" she said often to herself, with that utter self-abandonment to despair which it is the privilege of very young persons to feel concerning those troubles of their lives which are so very terrible to themselves, and appear to be so very childish and unreal to those who are older and more accustomed to the world and its frequent disappointments.

But at nineteen a strong healthy constitution very soon recuperates itself from even the double shock of a panic-stricken crowd and a broken limb. On the fourth day, Elizabeth was upon the sofa in her bedroom, and in a week's time she was out in the garden again.

She was a little weak and tottering, it is true, as she crept across the lawn, leaning upon old Adam's arm; Adam, whose penitence and regret had kept him sleepless and almost foodless ever since the fatal night. But save that her arm was in a sling, and her pretty colour a little bit washed out, she looked very much her usual self again.

The vicar's wife had just driven round in her low basket pony-carriage to offer to take her out; but Mrs Bertram, who wanted to pay a distant visit herself, decided at once that dear Elizabeth would hardly be up to the shaking of a carriage to-day, and that if Mrs Alston would be so very kind as to take her out instead—her poor nerves having been so very much upset by all that had happened—it would be a true kindness; whilst dear Elizabeth would be far better off left quiet upon the lawn to enjoy the air by herself. Elizabeth was not inclined to dispute this decision. It was a relief to be alone, and she was by no means sorry when Mrs Alston's pony-carriage had conveyed that good lady, with Mrs Bertram by her side, out at the white gate, and when the sound of its departing wheels had died away in the distance.

Then old Adam helped her across the lawn, and she sank

down upon a long lounge garden chair of wickerwork, and was at peace.

It was a hot breezeless afternoon—even in the shade there was no coolness. The butterflies skimmed gaily upon the heated air; myriads of tiny formless atoms spun by with little sharp stinging noises as they went; and now and then a heavy bumble bee blundered noisily past with a great bass note that fell with a curious harmony into Nature's ever tuneful concert.

The insect world was up and doing, but it was the kind of day when human beings, specially those of them who are weak and ill, are somewhat more prone to slumber than to exertion.

And so amidst the soothing sounds and sweet murmuring voices about her, the pretty head sank back upon the cushions behind her, and, stilled to rest by Nature's gentle lullaby, Elizabeth fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

How long she had slept she never knew—it might have been an hour, it might have been only ten minutes; but when she awoke it was with a start, a start such as comes to sleepers who are awakened purposely, and because they are wanted to sleep no longer, but are summoned back forcibly to the world around them, from the dreamland into which they have wandered away.

She awoke to find that one of her small thin hands was fast imprisoned within two strong manly ones, and that Marcus Cunningham was kneeling upon the grass by the side of her chair.

Often in after years that moment came back to him—the sweet face with the sudden flush upon it, the lovely eyelashes that unsealed for him their hidden secret, unveiling the eyes in which surprise and happiness were blended—and often and often he told himself, with bitter remorse, that it would have been better for her—ay, and better for himself too—had he never awakened her, but had gone away silently and left her there with her dreams, sleeping her happy slumber under the drooping boughs of the sycamore tree.

At the moment he only thought of her—of her fair loveliness, of his pleasure in the sight of her, of the actual delight it gave him to be with her again. Everything else had gone to the winds.

“How glad I am to see you again, Elizabeth!” he cried delightedly, calling her quite naturally by her name, without the slightest apology or hesitation.

There are some men—and they not the least successful in their dealings with women—who never apologise for the things they say and do.

Elizabeth took it—as he meant her to do—for granted, and it did not occur to her to be displeased. She sat up blushing, and pushed back the ruffled locks from her brow.

“Are you better, my dear little friend?” he continued, still grasping her hand in his. “How ill you have been, and how thin your pretty cheeks are!” I feel so guilty, because it was to hear my speech that you went to the meeting and got into trouble. I have been so miserable about you.”

“And yet you have never sent to ask after me!” she said reproachfully, but feeling very happy all the same.

“Never once, have I!” he answered, smiling and looking into her eyes with happy assurance that he would read forgiveness there. “You do not suppose, do you, that was because I did not want to know what others told me every day? Don’t you think it was better to wait and come and see for myself how you were, as soon as I could hope to see you?”

Elizabeth was silent, drinking in the sweet flattery with too ready ears. He did not tell her that he had been scouring about all over the country attending meetings and making speeches ever since the fatal evening at Hamerton, and that it was literally the first moment he had had to make any inquiry for her, and that the fact of his being able to see her was an accidental occurrence which he had not counted upon when he set out upon his walk.

He got himself another garden chair and sat down beside her, and the butterflies flitted on above the flowers, and the bees hummed and the insects swung through the air, but Elizabeth did not feel in the very least sleepy now, only so wildly and deliriously happy that she could scarcely steady her voice to answer his questions. He asked her so many questions—How her poor arm was? and if she did not feel very weak? and whether it tired her to talk? and so on. And then he asked her what had made her go to the Hamerton meeting in such a fashion, and sit amongst the crowd with only the old gardener to take care of her.

“I wanted to hear you speak,” she answered, blushing deeply, and twisting a little crimson rosebud about nervously between her trembling fingers.

“But why did you not ask Lady Brabberstone to bring you? You could have sat with the other ladies upon the platform.”

“She did not invite me, and I did not like to ask. You see, there were so many to go; and Lady Brabberstone is some-

times very kind to me, but sometimes she forgets me, I think, and I suppose she did not think I wanted to go."

"But if you had sent to me, I would have given you a platform ticket."

"Oh, I could not have done that!" she cried, lifting her shy eyes for one moment to his face. "I should not have dared."

"Not dare to ask such a trifle from your friend? Oh, Elizabeth!"

"It seemed so much easier to go with Adam and say nothing to anybody. I did not mean you ever to hear I had been there," she added, with a little smile.

"You did not evidently reckon upon a row, and upon getting you poor little arm broken, you silly little child! Now tell me something else, Elizabeth," and he bent down closely over her chair. "What did you mean by what you said when you woke up and found yourself upon that bench, looking into my face?"

"What did I say—I do not remember?" she murmured.

But she remembered very well, and the colour flamed up hotly into her cheeks.

"Shall I remind you then," he continued earnestly, fixing such burning eyes upon her that she could not meet them; "shall I tell you what you said? It was 'So it was not a dream.' What was it that was not a dream, Elizabeth?"

A silence. Her pretty head bent lower and lower, and the poor little rose was torn into shreds between her fingers. "Tell me—what was it?" he persisted; yet still a guilty confusion kept her silent.

But Marcus Cunningham was one of those men who always get their own way with women. He was determined to make her answer, and she was as powerless to resist him as a baby.

He laid one hand over both hers and grasped them hard, crushing rosebud and all with a strong yet tender grip which set her heart beating deliriously.

"You must tell me, you know," he said, with that little masterful manner of his by which he always got what he wanted; and Elizabeth succumbed.

"I had been dreaming, I think," she began hesitatingly.

"So I imagine; well, what was the dream about?"

"It was about—about you."

"Yes? And it was a nice dream about me?"

"I did not say it was nice," she answered, with a smile, in which, in spite of her confusion, there was an awakening of coquetry.

"Ah, but I know that it was nice, because you looked so

happy when you saw me," he replied with confidence—"tell me about it?"

"It was only that we were together somewhere, sitting in some cool green place alone—a garden, I think it was."

"Like this?"

"Yes, something like this."

"And that made you so very happy?"

"I do not remember."

Then Marcus Cunningham stole his arm gently behind her, and without startling or frightening her in the least he somehow managed to draw her quite close to himself, so that before she quite knew how it came to pass her head was resting upon his shoulder. She was too weak, mentally and physically, to resist him, and then she was so very, very happy!

"Shall I tell you what I saw in your eyes when they looked up into mine?" he whispered; "I saw that you loved me. Look up at me again, so that I may read that secret once more, Elizabeth!"

There was passion in the low murmured words, a passion that half terrified her even in the midst of her joy. Love had indeed come to her at last, just as he had come to hundreds of others, and the thrill of his perfumed breath awoke the woman's heart into sudden life within the maiden's breast. This, then, was Love! this divine thing of which she had read, and of which the poets sang, and which, perchance, in secret she had looked and longed for! Even in that moment of delight and bewilderment there flashed through her mind a desire that it had not come upon her in so sudden a fashion; that she might have been prepared a little for what was coming; that she might have had it for a little while all to herself to dream about and to cherish in secret. The very suddenness seemed to destroy the reality of it: she could not believe in it quite; it seemed too wonderful and too great a thing to be true. Like some trance-like vision, it appeared to her that if she did but speak, it would vanish and fade away into nothingness, and that she must surely awake in another minute and find that she was alone, and that it was nothing but a midsummer day-dream.

And then before she could answer, or even lift her love-laden eyes, as he told her to give her sweet secret once more into his keeping, a something came to pass that scattered all the romance and the poetry to the four winds of heaven, and brought the idyll in the cool green garden to a sudden end, so that Love, keeping his invisible watch above them, shook out his rainbow-coloured wings upon the summer breezes, and fluttered away affrighted and dismayed.

This terrible something was nothing more strange or wonderful than the sound of Mrs Alston's pony-carriage wheels as they turned creakingly in at the white gate, not a couple of hundred yards behind the lawn.

The lovers started guiltily apart, and Mr Cunningham sprang to his feet and held out his hand to wish her good-bye.

Elizabeth looked miserable, and the corners of her pretty mouth drooped despairingly.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" she gasped. "When shall I see you?—when will you come again?"

Marcus was looking black and cross—yet a physiologist might have discovered a faint shadow of relief in his face, in spite of the disgust in the uplifted lines about his brow, and the swift angry glances he cast at the rapidly-advancing pony-carriage.

"I can't say—not till after the Election, I fear," he answered hurriedly.

"Not till the week after next!" she cried dismayed; there was utter despair in her voice, and her eyes filled with tears.

"I can't help it. You can't imagine the amount of work I have to get through before Monday week!—and it is so difficult to get away from the Brabberstones too."

"Oh *do, do* come before then!" wailed poor Elizabeth dismally. And then Marcus Cunningham frowned. Men hate to be implored and entreated. An older woman would have known better, and would have taken the situation with coolness and self-possession; but Elizabeth knew nothing of men and their ways—she was unversed in the intricate art of coquetry, and in all those subtle trickeries which a woman who has had ever so little experience understands that she must exercise if she desires to keep the fickle fancy which her beauty has won.

Elizabeth only knew that the cup of happiness was dashed away from her lips at the very moment when she was about to drink it, and to talk to her about the week after next was much as if he had mentioned a future century or another world. What were fifty Elections, or the fate of a dozen nations, compared to the wonder of her own new-born love and happiness? and how could any work upon the face of the earth be important enough to come before the unfinished story of bliss which he had only as yet begun to unfold to her?

Poor little Elizabeth!

"It is not the least use my promising to come and see you again before the Election," Marcus was saying to her in the coolest and most matter-of-fact voice. "I should only dis-

appoint you, so it is better to say nothing about it. Of course, if by any chance I can see my way to running up for an hour, I shall come ; but you must not reckon upon it. In any case, I will let you know the moment the poll is out, although no doubt you will hear the result nearly as soon as I shall ; and I will of course come and see you then directly." Then with a smile and a softened manner he added, as he pressed her hand again, "So think of me dear child, and wish me good luck till then." Then he lifted his hat to her, and was gone, passing the pony-carriage with another bow almost immediately after he turned away.

Elizabeth sat very still and quiet after he had gone. For some minutes she only felt utterly and unspeakably miserable, and the garden, with its gay flower-beds, and the shifting lights and shadows across the smooth shaven lawn, all lay before her in the blurred mist of her own tear-filled eyes. But little by little her reason and her common sense came back to her, and she became quite angry with herself for her own foolishness.

"How *could* he stay any longer when he saw mother coming back ? and if he had stayed, where would have been the use of it ?" she argued to herself, making excuses, as every true woman will always do till the end of time, for the shortcomings of the lover in whom she desires to see no flaw. "Of course it was enough to make him cross to be interrupted just at such a moment, and it was no wonder he spoke as if he was annoyed. What a silly ungrateful girl I am to be vexed with him for such a trifle, he who had just asked me to love him, who has done me such a wonderful honour, and brought such happiness and joy to me ! And as to the Election, of course he was right ; it is a very important thing to him ; perhaps, indeed, our marriage depends upon it"—poor ignorant Elizabeth !—"and that is why he looked so anxious and bothered. Of course, he cannot like to be away from me so long, any more than I like it, but he said it was inevitable, and no doubt he is quite right, and I am only foolish and exacting to expect him to come sooner. What a bad way to begin ! Oh, I wish I had told him so many things I am thinking about now ! After all, ten days soon fly away, and surely I have enough to think about to last me in happiness till then."

And then she smiled to herself, and the pink colour stole up to her face again, and the happy glow into her eyes, and she looked so pretty sitting there in the flickering shadow, with her cheek resting upon her hand, that even Mrs Bertram, coming towards her across the lawn, could not help noticing how nice she looked, and wondering whether her daughter

after all might not command some kind of admiration in the world.

"She will never, of course, be run after as I was," said Mrs Bertram to herself, "but she has decidedly improved in looks of late, if only that arm is not scarred."

"Was not that Mr Cunningham who was just going away as I came back, Elizabeth?" she inquired, standing over her daughter, and looking down at her not unkindly.

Elizabeth coloured up to the roots of her hair.

"Yes, mother."

"Well, you need not get so red, my dear. I suppose the Brabberstones told him to call; and I am sure, after your breaking your arm at his stupid political meeting, it was the very least he could do to come and inquire after you. You must not make too much of it, my dear; common civility required him to come once, but he is not likely to come again; those sort of men don't waste their time over little country girls, though, of course, they know what is the right and proper thing to do. The only thing I blame him for, is for not stopping to speak to me; but perhaps he did not know who I was, and took Mrs Alston and myself for visitors."

Elizabeth murmured something unintelligible, and her mother sank wearily down into the chair which had been so lately vacated by the Byronic image of perfected man. Elizabeth shuddered slightly to herself at the profanation.

"Well, I have had a very nice drive," began Mrs Bertram, in her usual self-absorbed manner, "although the heat was awful, and Mrs Alston had never thought of putting in a cushion for my back; and really the angle of that carriage-seat is a trial to anybody who like my poor self is not strong. Still, I got a little rest at the Hicks', who were at home; and we left cards on the Robertsons, which has been on my mind a long time; and then we called at dear Dr Fairgrave's on our way home, and were so fortunate as just to catch him in; and he made me up a cordial draught then and there which he made me drink. That man is *so* thoughtful! I never met another like him. Fancy his thinking of a cordial for me! and making it up *himself* in his surgery."

"It will be down in his Christmas bill," murmured Elizabeth irrepressibly.

Her mother turned upon her indignantly.

"Elizabeth, how dare you? What a wicked, evil mind you must have! I am ashamed of you—I am indeed."

And, deeply offended, Mrs Bertram buried herself in the pages of the Court Journal, which she had brought out with her.

Elizabeth was not at all ashamed of herself. It was a little revenge which she had carried out in return for that horrid speech of her mother's, and the terrible reasons she had assigned for Marcus Cunningham's call.

"Nothing, no, nothing shall induce me to tell her now!" she said to herself savagely. "What a state of wild excitement she would be in if she knew that I was engaged to be married to him!" for it was thus that Elizabeth interpreted her late interview with her lover. "But I will not tell her one single word, not one word! I will keep my secret all to myself, and then when the election is over, and Marcus is M.P. for East Silshire, then I will go to her very coolly and just say, 'I am going to marry Mr Cunningham, mother!' and how amazed she will be!"

And there was a little natural glow of vanity and womanly pride within her at the thought, for, after all, it was a wonderful thing to be the chosen one of such great a man as her lover would be when he was the county member, and everybody running after him and struggling for his favour and his notice!

Elizabeth was not at all insensible to this, and her heart swelled with triumph as well as with love when she thought about it.

So she kept her secret to herself, and told her mother never one word of it.

And she sat on in dreamland in her garden-chair, recalling every word and every look in a very ecstasy of the enchanted paradise of memory, till by-and-by the housemaid came across the lawn to fetch her.

"Oh, ma'am, I'm sure Miss Elizabeth ought to go in—the doctor said she was to be out an hour for the first time, and now it's nearly three!" cried Jane reproachfully.

And when Elizabeth stood up dutifully to obey the summons, her mother was considerably surprised, and somewhat conscience-stricken, when her daughter tottered a little as she rose, and then fell back again into her chair in a dead faint.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HONOURABLE GUY FALLS IN LOVE.

IN the heat and excitement of a contested election the soberer judgments of ordinary life are apt to be laid aside, and a good many things are done to secure a vote which are not strictly

judicious, yet which the pressure of circumstances seems to render expedient at the time.

Thus it was that in a moment of exaltation and enthusiasm Lord Babberstone telegraphed for his son.

"We can't afford to lose a vote," he said to his wife, in extenuation of his act of imprudence. "I made over those Mile Green farms to Guy when he came of age, on purpose that he might have a vote; and a vote is a vote, and we shall have to beat up all the outstanding electors in every direction, in a fight like this."

"Guy has been going on so much more steadily of late," demurred Lady Brabberstone, with a pucker of anxiety across her brow; "it seems such a pity to unsettle him; he always gets into mischief down here—remember the last time."

"Ah, well, he is older now, and perhaps he has become wiser;" but even Lord Brabberstone sighed as he spoke the hopeful words; and the allusion to the Christmas before last, when Guy had come home for a week, and set the parish by the ears by making such outrageous love to one of the village girls that her indignant parents had come up to the Castle to complain to his Lordship, and to request that the offender should be sent away, had not yet quite lost its power to sting and humiliate him.

Nevertheless, as he had said, a vote is a vote, and the Honourable Guy was sent for, and appeared duly upon the scene.

He was a dissipated-looking young man, red-haired and red-eyed, with a pale unwholesome complexion, that spoke of late hours and frequent excesses. He was rather pleased to be sent for at home, and to find himself of some slight importance there, and the house being full of visitors when he arrived, he endeavoured honestly for the first two days to behave himself properly and respectably.

But there are persons to whom propriety and respectability of demeanour appear to be conditions which it is difficult to simulate, and impossible to keep up. Guy got very soon tired of trying to talk politely, and of pretending an interest in the ^{at} topic of the day which he did not feel. Young ladies were ^{at} bore, old ladies a terror to him. The men looked at him askance, and even his father and mother treated him with a cold displeasure. He knew that he was a black sheep, but instead of being penitent, he became exasperated, and the bad points of his character began to declare themselves. On the third evening he drank too much wine at dinner, and became odiously hilarious upon joining the ladies in the drawing-room,

so that his father's attention having been called by Sir James Ingram to his condition, he had to be forcibly taken away, and delivered over into the charge of the butler, who ignominiously conducted him upstairs to his own apartment. Lord Brabberstone began to repent of his impulsive telegram, and found it in his heart to wish that the Conservative cause might have been the loser by one vote. However, he consoled himself by recollecting that Monday was now at hand, and that by dint of careful watching Guy might easily be suppressed into decency for the two intervening days.

The next morning, however, every lady in the house turned her back upon him, and Guy, in a high state of dudgeon, took himself off out of the house, and returned to it no more till dinner-time.

In the confusion and the excitement of the rapidly approaching event, no one noticed his absence save as an agreeable relief, and his parents and sister were too thankful not to be reminded of his iniquities, to make any inquiries concerning his occupations.

That evening, however, after Lady Brabberstone had retired to her dressing-room, there was a knock at the door, and to her surprise her son entered the room and requested a few minutes' conversation with her.

Lady Brabberstone sent her maid away, and begged her son to be seated. She was dressed in a loose white wrapper, and the diamonds still glittered in the coils of her dark hair, in which there were now a few silver threads. She was a fine-looking woman still, the sort of woman whom a good son would have been very proud of; but Guy was not a good son, and all he thought about his mother was that she was "down upon him," and often put "the gov'nor" up to things about him. As to Lady Brabberstone, no doubt some natural maternal instinct burnt in her bosom towards her only son, but she was too proud and cold a woman to forgive him entirely the many slights and affronts, to say nothing of the shame and humiliation, which he had time after time brought upon her.

She surveyed him with an almost irrepressible anxiety.

What iniquity was he going to unfold to her now? she wondered.

She bent her dark eyes with a painful scrutiny upon him.

He appeared flushed and excited, but as far as she could tell, he was sober. That at all events was something.

"Where have you been all day, Guy?" she inquired.

"Well, that is exactly what I'm going to tell you, mother. I daresay you fancy I've been at the public-house, or getting

into mischief at Hamerton, but for once you'll be wrong. Your fine friends all turn their backs upon me, my lady, so I've been finding out some friends for myself."

Lady Brabberstone could not imagine what he was going to say; she fixed her eyes upon him with an ever-increasing anxiety.

Guy seemed to enjoy her perplexity; there was a twinkle of cunning in his small watery eye.

"Who are your friends, Guy? I hope—"

"You hope they are respectable, you are going to say! Oh, yes, they're right enough; ladies; quite tip-top; correct both of them! I've been paying a long visit there to-day."

"You paid a visit to ladies?" she repeated, somewhat blankly. The idea of Guy's paying a visit to any woman above the rank of a barmaid was almost too wonderful to be grasped.

"Yes; a long visit," he repeated, enjoying her bewilderment. "I went there at twelve; was invited to lunch; and pressed to remain on to tea."

"You were *pressed*! God gracious! who on earth are these ladies? They could not have known who you are!"

"Oh, yes, they did, perfectly well. I ain't such an outcast everywhere as I am at home, mother! and, what's more, I'm determined to have a home of my own; and that's what I am coming to—I am going to get married."

"Great Heavens! Guy, are you mad?" exclaimed his mother, fairly startled out of her wits.

"Not at all. Why shouldn't I be married as well as anybody else, and settle down and become respectable? Isn't it what you and the gov'nor are always preaching to me about?"

Lady Brabberstone could not in reason and justice deny the force of his words.

"But who on earth would marry you—you, with your character and reputation?" she exclaimed impatiently.

"Oh, as to that," laughed Guy, "there's a good many women won't object to Lord Brabberstone's heir, though he may not have been always quite a saint in his conduct!" Guy was no fool; he was as shrewd and as wide-awake in his own way as his father. "You see I must have the name and the title when the gov'nor dies," he continued, waving his hand airily and lightly over the subject of his father's demise, "and there's any amount of girls who think about that, and will put up with a lot in a fellow for the sake of it. I know what I'm about, mother. All I want you to do is to get round the gov'nor to give me a decent allowance, so that I can get married at once."

"But, Guy, have you fixed upon the lady?—have you seen

any one yet who would be likely to marry you?" questioned his mother with curiosity.

"Lord love you, yes!" cried the Honourable Guy, bringing down his hand with a hearty slap upon his mother's knee, so that she jumped as much from pain as from surprise. "Haven't I told you I've seen her to-day?—seen, and settled the whole business?"

"Settled?" gasped her ladyship, feeling as if her brain was giving way. "*Settled*—already? Oh, but that is impossible!"

"Well, I've settled it with the old one anyway;—haven't, of course, spoken to the young 'un yet, but the mother says there'll be no difficulty there. She's a deuced pretty girl I can tell you, mother, and will make an uncommon good show by-and-by when she comes into your diamonds!"

A ray of illumination flashed suddenly into the utter darkness of Lady Brabberstone's comprehension.

"You are talking of the Bertrams, Guy, at the Lodge!" she cried, with genuine excitement. "Is it possible that designing child Elizabeth has been setting her cap at you? Oh, I have no patience with such slyness!"

"Now just you shut up that!" cried Guy roughly; "there isn't any setting of caps in the question. The old girl was civil enough—sweet as sugar-candy, but Elizabeth sat by and never spoke a word hardly all day. That's just what I like—a girl who holds her tongue. I hate 'em when they chatter. She just suits me exactly. Last time I was at home I saw her in church—where you made me go—a scraggy-looking little thing, without a bit of flesh on her bones, or style about her. Now she's as plump as a partridge, and with a smart go-ahead air with her that I like. I'm going to marry Elizabeth Bertram, mother, so don't make any mistake about it."

"And do you mean to tell me that you have spoken to her mother already?"

"Of course I have; what's the good of letting the grass grow? I told her plump out, and she was delighted, and said it would be all right."

"But Mrs Bertram knows about you as well as I do,—how badly you have behaved all your life—what scrapes you have got into, and how often you get drunk—surely she can't consider you a desirable husband for her daughter!"

"I'm sure I don't care a d— whether she does or not. All I know is that she is quite ready to forget my past offences in consideration of my future expectations. Mothers aren't all so highly moral in their ideas as you are, my lady."

"No, indeed!" assented Lady Brabberstone indignantly and bitterly.

And it seemed to her that Elizabeth and her mother were nothing better than vipers whom she had nourished in the bosom of kindness, so that they might turn round upon her and sting her and outwit her. Nevertheless, as she began to get accustomed to the idea, she could not but own that it might be the very best thing in the world for Guy. As she looked at his mean dissipated face, upon the distorted features, across which the fatal word Drink was imprinted so plainly that any baby could read the writing of it; at his shrunk chest and stooping shoulders; as she took in with the bitter disgust of a handsome, healthy woman the whole of his insignificant and unwholesome-looking person, she felt that she should despise Elizabeth from the very bottom of her heart for selling herself to such a creature. And yet, for her son's sake, she could not deny that such a marriage might be the salvation of him. In their own world who was there who would mate with such a man? Which of all Rachel's high-born and high-bred girl friends who had the pick of half-a-dozen eldest sons to choose from would be likely to decide in favour of Lord Brabberstone's degraded-looking heir? No; if he married at all, it would have to be into a class a little below him, so that the dazzle of his title and his position might outweigh the too-well-known drawbacks of his person and his character. And in that case, where—if she herself was so sordid as to consent to it—could a better wife be found for him than Elizabeth? She was a lady at all events, and they knew all about her. She was in a way a cousin, indeed, and there would be nothing to be ashamed of in her. Why, good Heavens! he might have brought home a barmaid as a wife! and Lady Brabberstone shivered.

"Well, you'll speak to the gov'nor?" inquired Guy, breaking in upon the train of her thoughts.

She told him that she would do so, that very night. She even kissed him, and bade God bless him, with some emotion, as she wished him good-night; and prayed him to turn over a new leaf and amend his ways.

Lady Brabberstone did not go to bed that night until she had fulfilled her promise to her son, and had told his father what he proposed to do. She was hardly prepared for the cordial and hearty satisfaction with which he met her communication.

"It will be the salvation of him!" he cried, with unfeigned delight. - "Come, that is the best bit of news I have heard for a long time. What a good thing he came home! Elizabeth

Bertram is, after all, a good girl and a lady, and with his past life and character, we could never have expected him to marry according to his rank and position ; go and call on Mrs Bertram to-morrow, my love, and tell her how pleased we are. As things are, I really look upon it as a good match for him."

Whether or no it could be looked upon as a good match for Elizabeth to wed her to an habitual drunkard of unprincipled character, and an enfeebled constitution, neither Lord nor Lady Brabberstone took the trouble to inquire. It would be an unspeakable advantage that Guy should marry respectably and settle down, if he could, into the decorum of domestic life. At whose expense this reformation was to be consummated, mattered very little to his parents. Lady Brabberstone indeed was in no way able to shake off the first impression that Guy's news had made upon her,—that Elizabeth was sly, and had endeavoured to entrap her son. She had never really liked Elizabeth ; she was jealous of her pretty looks, and disliked to see her in company with Rachel, with whose more pronounced style she contrasted not at all unfavourably. Rachel's very affection for her little friend only increased her mother's ungenerous feelings towards her ; she had always discouraged the friendship between the girls, and had thrown cold water upon all Rachel's efforts to see more of her.

"She is a nasty, underhand little thing," said Lady Brabberstone to herself, as she laid her head upon her pillow. "She angled for Marcus Cunningham with her soft looks and little *ingénue* ways, and rushed off to that meeting by herself, in that unladylike way, no doubt to attract his attention and notice ; and then got her arm broken, and fainted, to make him pity her. However, the little dodge hasn't answered, and Marcus has never troubled himself even to ask after her. So I suppose she thought she would try and catch poor Guy. Well it will be a fine marriage to her, no doubt, and she may consider herself very fortunate. I may be grateful to her if she marries Guy, but I shall never really like her. And, for the present, I shall say nothing to Rachel."

The next day was Sunday, and everybody went to morning service in the little country church. The three rows of sittings consecrated to the use of the Castle were full ; and a little way down the side aisle Mrs Bertram and her daughter, the latter with her arm in a sling, also rose up in their places at the customary summons of "When the wicked man."

Elizabeth's eyes strayed away across the church. Marcus Cunningham was standing up straight and stern, with his eyes cast down and his arms crossed ; Rachel, in the most charming

costume of white muslin and pink ribbons, with a tiny pink-rosed bonnet on her dark head, stood close to him. Elizabeth envied her. Happy Rachel ! to be so near him, to mingle her voice with his in the singing, and to breathe forth her prayers to heaven in unison with his. How handsome and clever he looked ; how different to all other men ; how good ; how noble ! And he was all her own, her very own ; she would belong to him, and have a right to be proud of him. How her heart beat under her little fresh blue cotton dress at the ecstatic thought.

She wished he would give her one look, just to show that he saw her ; but he did not look her way at all, and Elizabeth, with a vague sensation of disappointment, was on the point of lowering her eyes on to her prayer-book, when suddenly they were caught on the way to it by the fixed glances of the Honourable Guy, whose red-rimmed and watery orbs were fastened upon her with a look of whose meaning there could be no mistake whatever. Then it seemed to her as if Lord Brabberstone too was looking at her with unusual interest and curiosity ; and her ladyship put up her long tortoiseshell handled eyeglasses to look at her ; and poor Elizabeth, not understanding why they should all stare at her, and imagining that by some miracle they must have been reading her thoughts, coloured hotly, and looked down in great confusion upon the pages of her prayer-book.

After that, whenever she looked up she found that Guy was gazing at her with the same expression.

"How I hate that Mr Brabberstone !" she said to herself ; "why does he stare at me in that dreadful way, I wonder ?"

But as to Marcus Cunningham, he never looked at her at all.

CHAPTER IX.

LADY BRABBERSTONE SAYS A WORD IN SEASON.

NEVER had a week seemed so long to Elizabeth in her life. She had counted the days, and sighed over the slow-lagging hours ; but days that are counted are apt to treble themselves to the weary imagination, and to sigh over the length of the hours, is only to prolong their interminable minutes. She had in fact carried on her daily life with infinite trouble and effort, and after that one brilliant day of radiant happiness, the downfall into the prosaic details of her ordinary existence had seemed almost unbearable. To be the possessor of such a wonderful and glorious secret, of such a treasure of splendid happiness,

and yet all the time to sit and say nothing ; to get up, to go to bed ; to listen all day to her mother's oft-told stories and endless murmurings ; to eat her meals ; to take her little weary walks along the terrace, and to talk about hundreds of things which did not interest her in the very least, all this was a dreadful trial to the happy child-woman with the warm glow of her first love burning in her heart. Over and over again she fed her passion and her delight by recalling every incident of that never-to-be-forgotten afternoon, by dwelling upon the sweet memory of every word that he had spoken, of every look that he had bent upon her. The pressure of his arm about her waist, the flutter of his breath against her cheek, the caressing hand that had rested lightly upon her hair, all were pictured and re-pictured again and again in her mind ; and yet as each day went by dully, slowly, uneventfully, these delightful pictures seemed to become fainter and fainter, there was an uncertainty about their outlines, and a dream-like unreality, that increased ever daily upon them. The present weariness grew more tedious, and the past delight became merged in a miserable longing to be with him, and to see him again.

Often she scolded herself for her foolishness, and reproved herself for her impatience, and presently as the week came to an end, a feverish expectation as to what was to happen to her next, succeeded to the weariness and the tedium of the days of waiting. Sunday she would see him in church ! Monday was the Election, and Tuesday, nay possibly Monday evening, he would come to her again ! So she comforted herself, and her broken arm got well apace, and her pretty face grew rounder and rosier, and her eyes resumed their brightness.

But Sunday was, after all, disappointing. In church he did not look at her at all, and when they joined the Castle party outside in the churchyard, he seemed to be so surrounded and so taken up with the numbers of country gentlemen and farmers who crowded about him to wish him success, or to impart some important piece of whispered information, that he never saw Elizabeth standing with her mother amongst the little crowd of the ladies from Brabberstone.

"I am coming to see you this afternoon," Lady Brabberstone was saying meanwhile to her mother,— "at five ; mind you are at home ; I have something to talk about."

Mrs Bertram knew quite well what it was, and she trembled a little. How would the great people at Brabberstone take this awful communication about Guy's intentions ? But she gathered hope when Lord Brabberstone shook hands with her, and patted Elizabeth kindly on the shoulder.

"May I come too?" Guy was asking her, standing in front of her in the path.

Elizabeth's eyes were fixed upon a tall figure a few yards away, from which a crowd of black coats hopelessly divided her, and her ears were straining hard to catch the faintest sound of his voice.

"Certainly—I'll go there without fail, Mr Jameson," she heard him say—and then he pulled out his pocket-book and wrote something down. "At six you think I shall catch him? And how about that other man?—a carpenter I think you said he was, at one of those cottages by the mill—shall I go there too?— Oh, and Meeks, Paradise Row, you said, Mr Mason?" etc., etc. There seemed to be no end to it. How full of business he was! Had that little garden idyll of a week ago faded utterly away from his memory? were his words all forgotten, and love as though it had never been?

"Mayn't I come too," repeated Guy, just in front of her, and he bent his red head down so that she could not see Marcus Cunningham at all, and that made her detest him more than ever.

"Come—come where?" she answered vaguely, and a little bit distractedly.

"Up to the Lodge this afternoon, with my mother?"

"Oh, if you like," she replied listlessly; and then the whole party moved on towards the gate of the churchyard, and she forgot Guy Brabberstone's very existence, in her anxiety not to be left too far behind.

Outside there was a great shaking of hands all round, and Sir James Ingram came up and began to talk to her, so that when all at once Marcus looked up and saw her standing close behind him, she was so hemmed in between the two men who stood on either side of her, that he could not, even if he had wished, have pushed his way any nearer to her. But he lifted his hat, and smiled, and called out,—

"I hope you are better, Miss Bertram?"

And then poor little Elizabeth went home in a seventh heaven of happiness.

When everybody was sitting at lunch at the Castle, Marcus Cunningham suddenly turned round to his hostess and said,—

"Did I not hear you say that you were going to walk to Mrs Bertram's this afternoon? I think, if you will let me, I will come with you, Lady Brabberstone. I ought to call upon her, really, and make civil inquiries after the pretty young lady whose arm got broken in her enthusiasm for the Conservative cause, ought I not?"

Lady Brabberstone looked at him keenly. She was a little bit puzzled—something in this speech struck her as being a trifle too elaborate to be quite genuine.

"Oh, poor little Elizabeth you mean! Dear me, Mr Cunningham, you must not flatter yourself that it was either the Conservative cause or even *you* that got her into such trouble, poor child! She does not really care about politics at all; why, she does not even belong to the Primrose League! but girls often like little freaks of adventure, and Elizabeth has always run wild—her poor mother can't manage her a bit."

This was spoken as though Elizabeth were a regular handful, a naughty child whose vagaries were worthy of blame rather than indulgence.

Marcus knew that it was unjust and cruel to speak of her so, yet he felt himself powerless to defend her, for to take up cudgels in her defence would have been to admit his interest in her, and that he was in no way prepared to do.

"Guy has promised to walk over to Mrs Bertram's with me after lunch," continued Lady Brabberstone; "and we had arranged that Rachel and the Miss Westons and Mr James should all go over in the waggonette, under your care, to Isley Farm. It's a lovely drive—one of the prettiest in the country; and you must go and see that waggoner at Isley, who was reported as 'doubtful.' Rachel saw his wife yesterday, and promised you should go and see him to-day. It will be combining pleasure with duty, will it not?"

Cunningham murmured an assent.

"I will give a pretty message from you to Mrs Bertram—that will be all that is necessary. She will understand that you could not possibly call, under the circumstances."

There was nothing for it but to do as he was told. Lady Brabberstone's plan was carried out to the letter, and she saw the party in the waggonette off from the door, Rachel and Marcus sitting side by side, evidently perfectly well pleased with one another, before she herself, with Guy as her companion, started to walk across the fields to the Lodge.

It was a close, heavy afternoon, with lowering grey banks of cloud, and a distant murmur of thunder in the air.

The drawing-room windows were all wide open. Mrs Bertram lay dozing upon the sofa; Elizabeth sat on a low stool, with an open book on her lap, looking out listlessly into the garden. Every footstep along the road made her start, every flutter of the hot breeze among the tree tops set her heart beating. She expected, she hoped, she feared, all in one.

Would he manage to come and see her to-day? She thought

it not improbable, and yet she scarcely dared to desire it. She looked pretty and pathetic in her longing and her impatience, and the little mouth drooped sadly at the corners as she sat and waited.

Presently a click at the white gate into the road made her start violently. She bent her head eagerly forth, and saw Lady Brabberstone and her son walking up the drive—there was nobody else.

With a little smothered exclamation of annoyance, and a frightened glance at her mother, who was slumbering peacefully upon the sofa, Elizabeth fled swiftly out of the window, round the corner of the house, down the terrace walk, and away down into the kitchen garden, that was well out of sight of the drawing-room windows, and here she sought and found both concealment and consolation amongst the gooseberry bushes.

She was not destined to remain long undiscovered. Scarcely ten minutes had elapsed before a crunching and cautious foot-step upon the gravel path warned her that somebody was walking about the garden looking for her. She crouched down closer, and kept as still as a mouse. Soon, from between the greenery of the trailing branches about her, she espied the red head and vacuous physiognomy of Guy Brabberstone. Like the child that she was, she made an ugly face at him as he passed within a few yards of her. He had not seen her, and Elizabeth believed that she was safe. But, alas! the danger was not yet over. When he came to the end of the walk, Guy stopped and looked about him, and then he came back again slowly retracing his steps.

And this time the tail of her light-hued gown, trailing upon the dark earth, betrayed her. He came eagerly forward.

"Ah, here you are! Thought I should find you out here somewhere. Having a good tuck at the gooseberries, are you? Didn't you see me go by? Oh, I see; you were hiding for fun! Aha! that was a good joke—but you see I've caught you, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth was standing up amongst the bushes. She looked red and confused, and very angry into the bargain.

"Who ever gave you leave to call me Elizabeth, Mr Brabberstone?" she said haughtily.

"Oh, don't look so angry—you're a sort of a cousin, you know. By Jove! what a stunner you look when you're in a rage; it's worth while cheeking you to see you look like that!"

coldly and contemptuously, as she moved forward out of her retreat towards him, with the distressing result that the thorns of the gooseberry boughs caught in her skirts, and Guy fell forward upon his knees to disengage them from the prickles. This was both undignified and unfortunate, and by the time Guy got up again and she was free, she was angrier than ever with him.

"Let us go back to the house," she said shortly.

"No; that is just what we aren't to do. My mother wants to have a talk to Mrs Bertram, and so they sent me out here to you till they've done their jaw."

Elizabeth walked along by his side in silent indignation.

"You've got to stop out and talk to me, you see," said Guy presently, with a grin, intended to be fond, which only succeeded in being grotesque.

"I don't want to talk to you in the very least," answered the girl angrily. "I have nothing to say to you, and you can have nothing to say to me; and if I mayn't go into the drawing-room, I shall go into the house by the back door, and sit up in my bedroom."

"Oh, Elizabeth, you wouldn't be such a sneak as that, when you know what I've come for!"

"I don't know, and I don't want to know," she answered.

"Oh, then, it's high time you should know then, if you haven't been sharp enough to guess it. I've come because I'm beastly spooney on you, and I want to marry you—now, do you understand?"

"I feel much flattered by your refined and delicately-worded proposal—"

"Now don't sneer at me like that! Hang it all, it isn't every girl without a penny who gets a chance of marrying the heir to a place like Brabberstone, who will be a lord into the bargain! There's nothing to sneer and turn up your nose for at such a position as *that*!"

"I assure you I am very far from sneering at the *position*," Elizabeth hastened to explain; "it is a very fine one; it is the individual who does not please me. You know very well that I never did like you, Mr Brabberstone. I wonder how you dare ask me to marry you!"

There are some men who are absolutely irrepressible, and Guy Brabberstone was of their number.

Insult and scorn were alike thrown away upon him. To be told he was disliked, moved him not from his purpose, neither did the anger of his divinity, and all her looks of disgust, serve to make him withdraw his unwelcome attentions.

He had never wooed any woman save a saucy barmaid or a pretty chambermaid before. It had always been his creed that women like being made love to at heart, but that they invariably pretend they don't like it, in order to egg a man on to further exertions. It did not occur to him that a lady must be approached in a different spirit and in quite another fashion to others of her sex ; and he could not see why he should not treat Elizabeth exactly as he had been in the habit of treating those young ladies of easy manners and of facile access with whom he had hitherto found himself popular and successful. His answer to Elizabeth's indignant repudiation was to pass his arm about her waist, and to drag her close to him.

"Oh, but I shall soon teach you to like me, my beauty !" he cried ; and what more the infatuated young man might have said and done it is not possible to divine—for here his rash words and actions were suddenly cut short by such a ringing, stinging slap upon the very middle of his mean, leering countenance, as caused him to dance back sputtering and cursing ; whilst Elizabeth, as much frightened by what she had done as by her tormentor's audacity, took to her heels and fled precipitately down the garden walk, almost tumbling headlong in her blind haste into the arms of a neat old gentleman who was coming slowly down the stone steps from the end of the terrace walk.

"Elizabeth, my dear little girl ! what has happened ? What is the matter ?"

"Oh, Sir James—it is you !" panted Elizabeth, breathlessly. "I never saw you coming !"

"My dear you seem greatly agitated—can I help you ? Ah !" and his eyes wandering beyond her caught sight of the small mean figure of Lord Brabberstone's heir scuffling away ignominiously in the distance. "Ah ! I see how it is ; it is that disreputable young scoundrel who has been annoying you—perhaps insulting you !" and the old gentleman's face flushed angrily.

Elizabeth's hand was pressed against her beating heart. She could hardly speak, but she managed to find breath enough to burst out laughing at this.

"Oh, no !" she cried ; "it was just the other way, I am afraid ! It was I who annoyed and insulted him ! I told him I hated him, and then I slapped his face as hard as ever I could ! Oh, don't stop me, Sir James, I must get in, or he will go and complain of me to his mamma, and shouldn't I catch it !" and she ran away lightly from him towards the house.

Sir James Ingram looked after her fondly and admiringly.

"What spirit ! what pluck !" he murmured to himself as he

ight footsteps! She slapped him, did she? Ha! ha! Serve him right! I only wish that little hand could have been heavy enough to hurt him! It was fine and spirited of her! Ah, there's nothing like youth and quick blood; it's worth all the experience of age! All the same, that young brute must be checked; I can't have my little girl insulted." And then he too walked slowly back towards the open drawing-room windows.

Meanwhile the two mothers indoors had got through their talk quite to their own satisfaction.

Mrs Bertram was charmed to discover that Lord and Lady Brabberstone would place no obstruction in the way of Guy's marrying Elizabeth, and Lady Brabberstone was interested to discover that Elizabeth had no other admirers, and was presumably heart-whole, and would therefore be unlikely to refuse her son.

"She will steady him down. Of course, he has been a naughty boy, as we all know, but he has sown his wild oats now, and there is really a great deal of good in him," said Guy's mother, who was naturally anxious to make the best of her black sheep.

Mrs Bertram was secretly delighted at this wonderful chance which had come in her way. Already she saw her daughter "My Lady," and mistress at the Castle, dispensing the Brabberstone hospitalities and wearing the Brabberstone diamonds. Such a vision was almost too dazzling and bewildering. She saw herself installed at her daughter's elbow, counselling, directing, and guiding all her actions, whilst she mentally relegated the present baron and his wife to a better world, and consigned them to the sleep of the righteous in the family vault hard by. All this would be glorious indeed! but Mrs Bertram was not such a fool as to seem to jump too greedily at the golden fruit that had come tumbling so miraculously into her mouth.

"All this," she said, with a pretty hesitation in her voice and manner; "all this, dear Lady Brabberstone, depends, of course, upon the consent of my dear girl."

Lady Brabberstone tossed her chin.

"Oh, Elizabeth will consent fast enough!" she said, with the vestige of a snort of derision.

Mrs Bertram was meek, but her colour rose at this.

"I could never force my child's inclinations," she said piously.

"Oh, it's pretty plain where her inclinations must lie!" retorted her ladyship; "Guy would never be where he is if Elizabeth had not given him some encouragement; and you said there was no one else."

She was the cleverer woman of the two, yet she was slightly disconcerted when Mrs Bertram, fanning herself languidly with her large black ostrich fan, replied,—

“No one else has actually *proposed* to Elizabeth, but men do not pass her over. She is not, of course, run after as I was at her age, still she has not been altogether overlooked; and your son’s character is not altogether satisfactory, as you yourself acknowledge, dear Lady Brabberstone.”

Mrs Bertram did not care a brass farthing about Guy’s character, but she did care about her own vanity, and was determined not to let Elizabeth go too readily.

Lady Brabberstone waved her hand impatiently.

“Yes, yes; we have discussed all that already. Elizabeth is no fool; she knows quite well what she is about. You imply that Elizabeth has had other chances, Mrs Bertram? They have not, I presume, amounted to much?”

Mrs Bertram looked modestly down.

“No, perhaps not. Still, when a young man of distinguished character and appearance comes to spend a whole afternoon in a girl’s society—”

“What young man?” inquired her ladyship sharply, and her breath came strangely short and quick.

Mrs Bertram enjoyed herself beyond measure, as she looked up sweetly and replied, with a seraphic smile,—

“Oh, only Mr Marcus Cunningham, my dear; but, as I told Elizabeth, no doubt he meant nothing at all!”

Lady Brabberstone walked home with her son a quarter of an hour later, with a very tempest raging within her.

Guy was sulky and cross, and would give no account of his interview with Elizabeth.

“It is evident to me that you set about it the wrong way,” said his mother irritably. “You must manage things better. This is your last chance in life, Guy—you must marry that girl, or your father will never see you again. For Heaven’s sake, behave like a gentleman to her now—you can resume your bad manners when she is your wife.”

After which sarcastic maternal counsel the two walked home in silence side by side.

Late that evening, after dinner, Lady Brabberstone found herself by Cunningham’s side. All through dinner, the talk had run upon the chances of the morrow; and there was a feverish excitement upon all who took any interest in the battle that was to be fought the next day.

Lady Brabberstone had not been wanting in her sympathy

she was practically alone with her young guest, she suddenly addressed the following words to him :—

“In the midst of all this turmoil, and of the natural absorption of your mind in the one great topic, dear Mr Cunningham, will you think me a very selfish mother if I venture to ask for your sympathy upon a purely personal and family matter ?”

“My dear Lady Brabberstone, how can you ask ?”

“Well, it is about my poor boy—you know what a sad trouble he has been to us all.”

Marcus looked discreetly down, and murmured an assent. None knew better than he did what a blackguard young Guy was, and what sort of character he bore.

“Well, he has got into a good many scrapes, and gone sadly astray, poor fellow. But now such a happy thing has happened, and there is a real chance of his pulling up, and becoming steady and settling down.”

“Indeed ! I am truly glad to hear it, Lady Brabberstone. Nothing indeed could give me greater pleasure.”

“Thanks, dear friend,” and she pressed his hand gratefully. I knew you would be glad, for our sakes and dear Rachel’s. It is a secret as yet, but I cannot help confiding it to you. Guy is going to be married.”

“Indeed !” Marcus looked amazed, but politeness constrained him to add his congratulations.

“Yes ; it is a happiness indeed to us that he should have fallen so genuinely in love with such a dear girl—not a good match in a worldly sense of the word, dear Mr Cunningham, but a sweet good girl whom we all love and know well, who will have such an elevating influence upon him, and be, as my lord says, the very salvation of him !”

“And might I ask—”

“Who she is ? Oh, yes, I feel I must tell *you*, Mr Cunningham. It is our dear little cousin, Elizabeth Bertram !”

And then having delivered her little poisoned arrow, Lady Brabberstone sailed away with a serene smile and cloudless brow to attend to some other of her many guests.

CHAPTER X.

THE RESULT OF THE POLL.

No one who has ever taken a part, however small, in a hotly-contested election, can ever forget the turmoil and the desperate excitement of the polling day.

The crowds lounging at the street corners ; the flags and the bunting displayed at the windows ; the placards of blue and scarlet blazoned with staring mottoes of every kind and order, from the nobly patriotic down to the intensely ridiculous ; the cheers and the counter cheers, shouts of derision and groans of execration, wherewith from morning until night a whole population, gone temporarily mad, rend the air in a very Babel of confusion as the carriages and carts fly backwards and forwards laden with grimy electors on their way to the polling stations, all make up a scene which is as striking as it is curious ; for to-morrow all these yelling, hooting, shouting men will go back peacefully and good-humouredly to their ordinary avocations, with no trace of ill-feeling towards their opponents, and no remembrance of the bitter passions which agitate them so violently to-day.

In the town of Hamerton, on the morning of the East Silshire election, excitement and party spirit raged hotly and wildly. The whole place was in a very ferment of agitation.

The "Snaggites" paraded the streets in gangs, bearing banners and placards adorned with fluttering ribbons, and yelling forth denunciations against Tyrants, Aristocrats, and Sneaking Tories in general, and against the Conservative candidate in particular. The "cheap loaf" was the particular stalking-horse of the hour, and was carried about in effigy—a huge and shapeless lump of plaster of Paris—on a wooden shutter upon the shoulders of four men, and aroused much enthusiasm, until a well-directed stone having broken a large hole in one side of it, it was discovered to be hollow, and the laugh was all on the other side, and "Radical promises and piecrust" were aptly quoted, whilst the "loaf" vanished from off the scene, and was speedily kicked into fragments down a side street by a delighted crowd of small boys, who had no particular political opinions but only a well-developed joy in a scrimmage, whatever might chance to be its origin.

The partisans of Cunningham, no less noisy and obstreperous than their opponents, paraded the town with a brass band much out of tune, which brayed forth at intervals the "National Anthem" and "Rule Britannia," whilst frequent groans for Mr Gladstone, and cheers for the different leaders of the Conservative party, arose in deafening chorus on every side.

Carriages towards noon began pouring into the town from every direction, and with scarcely an exception these all carried the Conservative colours, with placards of "Vote for Cunningham" plastered upon their panels. Amongst these the Brabberstone barouche figured conspicuously, and was particularly

active in fetching up lazy or dubious voters to the poll, to ride in "My Lord's" own carriage being an exalted honour which few bucolic hearts found themselves able to resist.

As for Rachel, she had never been so busy and so happy before. She drove her own little dogcart herself, and to her fell the real delight of bringing Marcus at an early hour into the town, and of depositing him at his committee rooms, amidst the deafening shouts of the bystanders. Something had been said about her taking him round to the polling stations of the neighbourhood, for her little bay horse was a noted fast trotter; but when amidst the cries she overheard one man shout out very loudly, "And a fine wedding-day to your honour, and to you, my lady, too, and as handsome a pair ye make as anybody could wish to see!" then Rachel got very red, and suggested that her father's phaeton should be placed at Mr Cunningham's service for the remainder of the day, whilst she went to beat up some of her country voters in the villages nearer home.

Marcus acquiesced readily. Truth to say, he was so intensely absorbed by his hopes and fears, and the gravity of the situation was so prominently in his mind, that if he had even heard the cry of the man in the crowd with his outward ears, it made no impression upon his inner senses; he neither saw Rachel's blushes nor noticed her embarrassment, and the change in her plans which she suggested did not seem to him to have any importance or significance.

Women, with Marcus Cunningham to-day, were completely in abeyance; they were less than nothing to him, save and except, in so far as they might help to influence the fortunes of the day.

Love was a dead letter to him—Ambition, the ruling passion of his life, absorbed every nerve and fibre of his being.

Last night he had received a shock. Yes, it had been distinctly a shock to him—of that he was very certain, for his vanity was as much wounded as his heart. He had turned a little sick and cold at Lady Brabberstone's piece of "good news," and a vision of a sweet wistful face and pathetic grey eyes haunted him with persistent bitterness through many hours of a sleeplessness and restless night.

"She is nothing but a heartless, scheming little flirt," he told himself angrily, "ready to sell herself to the highest bidder! Perhaps it may be her mother's doing that she is to be handed over to that brute young Brabberstone; but even if it be so, she is utterly contemptible and unworthy of another thought." And he said to himself that he was horribly disappointed in her.

Towards the morning he fell into a long and profound sleep, and awoke refreshed and invigorated, with all his faculties alert, and his courage braced up for the events of the day.

Then as he was dressing himself—tying his scarf before the looking-glass—he thought of Elizabeth once more, but this time in a different strain,—

“After all, it is a very good thing,” he said to himself. “It would have been a disastrous thing for me; my father would have been furious; and indeed, if I get in to-day, I do not see how I could possibly have married her. I should have had to back out of it, for it would have been ruin to my career. It is providential that things went no further than they did. I did not propose to her; I only gave her a kiss; a little desultory love-making on a summer afternoon is what it amounted to—that is all. Such an incident in a girl’s life is soon blotted out and forgotten: she will marry as she is told, and be none the worse for it; and I—well I shall be very much the better off! By-and-by I can make a marriage that will be a help and not a hindrance to me. Such a match would have been suicidal. Of course, I made a great fool of myself with the poor child. On the whole, I ought to be very much obliged to her for retiring from the situation, and to young Brabberstone too, for his opportune interference!” And Mr Cunningham finished his toilet with calm pulses and a heart which was decidedly a very long way from the tumult of despairing love. The coldness of his nature had re-asserted itself, his common sense pulled him back sharply from the natural impulses of youth and manhood; he was distinctly glad that Elizabeth had behaved so badly, and that he himself need have no further remorse of conscience or trouble of mind about her.

He had made love to her, and she had chosen, within a short week of that love-making, to throw him over for a rival whose position no doubt seemed to her to be better than his own!

On her then be the disgrace and the obloquy. Her conduct set him free from all further obligations towards her.

Whether or no he would have been true to her had Lady Brabberstone never made that little family disclosure to him, is a point upon which it is perhaps hardly fair to judge. In after years, he maintained stoutly that he would assuredly have been so; but then we know that the heart of man is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked, and that men are ever prone to credit themselves with a good deal more than others attribute to them. Marcus Cunningham’s best excuse is probably that at this period of his life he was deeply imbued with his father’s cold and calculating maxims of self-aggran-

disement, whilst love, that had just brushed against the fibres of his better nature, had not as yet penetrated any way into his being, so that he under-valued its influence, at the same time that he over-estimated his own superiority to all that was outside the one grand aim of his existence. He went forth to the day that was to decide such enormous issues in his career, with a mind from which he had succeeded in completely expunging all softer emotions, and in which the faint and fading image of poor Elizabeth no longer held the smallest place.

For her, poor child, what a long and anxious day it was, and how eagerly she watched and waited for the faint echoes of tidings from the political battle that was being waged upon her lover's behoof!

She wandered restlessly out into the village, listening eagerly to stray bits of information, and drinking in every scrap of news that bore upon the fortunes of the struggle.

"Bolton's men were voting dark blue to a man," was a remark which filled her with a rapture of delight; whilst on the other hand a further observation from a bystander that "Them their Snaggites was mortal confident," sufficed to cast her down again to the depths of woe.

She longed to go in to Hamerton, but feared it might displease Marcus if she did so; he would sooner, she felt certain, that she remained quietly at home and waited.

To the young it seems terribly hard to wait. Elizabeth had need of all her patience that day, for never did hours lag more slowly, or time seem to be weighted with more leaden wheels.

At last came the dinner hour, and she and her mother sat down to their simple little repast together.

Mrs Bertram, who cared not a farthing about the East Silshire election, talked on incessantly upon her favourite theme—herself, her feelings, and her own vanities. Elizabeth knew herself to be answering at random.

"Did you hear me, my dear?" said her mother once quite sharply.

"Yes, mother," replied the girl, with straining ears and wandering eyes.

"As I was saying, dear Dr Fairgrave thinks I want a change. He suggests that I should go to Sandypore for a fortnight, and have a few hot sea baths. No doubt they would strengthen my poor back, that has troubled me sadly these last few days. I thought— Oh! *what* is it, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth had jumped up suddenly from her chair.

"I thought I heard the door bell!" she cried breathlessly.

"I do wish you would remember my nerves sometimes, child.

You have set my heart off into palpitations with your thoughtless impetuosity, starting up like that! What on earth would it matter if it were the door bell, I should like to know?"

"I was hoping for news," murmured Elizabeth.

"News? What news, pray? Oh, you mean these dreadful elections? I really forgot they were going on. And what can it matter to a girl like you who becomes a Member of Parliament? You really seem to be grown quite silly about it. Do pay attention to what I am saying to you instead." Elizabeth sighed resignedly. "Well, as I was saying," continued Mrs Bertram, "of course we should do well to take Dr Fairgrave's advice, but then just now perhaps it would be a pity, as Mr Brabberstone is at home, and it would not do for him to think we were running away from him, would it?"

"Indeed," cried Elizabeth, awaking for the first time to an interest in what her mother was saying, "I should like nothing better than to run away from that man, for I can't abide him."

"Don't be foolish. Mr Brabberstone's attentions are marked. You cannot be blind to his intentions."

"What does that matter, if I hate him and his intentions too?" cried Elizabeth, with a little hot flush of anger burning in either cheek.

"Don't go into heroics, my dear. If Mr Brabberstone proposes to you, you will be a very lucky girl."

Elizabeth could not answer, because the maid came in with the pudding; but her heart beat indignantly; and then very soon she smiled, and brushed away the unpleasant suggestion.

How foolish it was to be annoyed and angry about that horrid young Brabberstone, when within another few hours, perhaps this very night, indeed, her lover, triumphant and happy, would be here himself to claim her, and to announce to her mother the great news of their engagement!

They finished dinner, Mrs Bertram keeping up a little undercurrent of talk, and Elizabeth absorbed in her own thoughts and longings.

Then Mrs Bertram retired to the drawing-room sofa for her evening doze. Usually when the night was fine, Elizabeth wandered forth into the garden at this hour, but to-night she would not leave the house. She drew her chair close to the table, and sat down in the red light of the rose-shaded lamp. But the book she took up was soon flung aside, for she could not keep her mind to the words before her eyes; and then she took out some needlework, but that fared equally badly. She began it inside out, and pricked her fingers with the needle. so that in

the end she was reduced to sitting absolutely idle, with clasped hands and a bent listening head.

An hour went by, the clock ticked loudly, and with an almost painful distinctness; her mother's even breathing, broadening now and again into something suspiciously like a snore, rose and fell with monotonous regularity; no other sound broke the silence of the quiet house.

Then all at once it came, a loud clanging peal at the front door bell! Elizabeth started to her feet with a sort of cry; Mrs Bertram awoke with a start and sat up on the sofa; and outside the servant's steps across the hall were heard hurrying to the door.

"Good gracious! who can that be?" exclaimed Mrs Bertram. "A visitor at this hour! and my hair all in confusion, and only my old tea gown on! Dear me, how inconsiderate people are!"

But Elizabeth spoke never a word: she was physically incapable of speech. Only she stood with a white face and wide-opened eyes facing the door.

It was flung open. Some one—a man—came in out of the gloom, quickly and with a certain gladness of gait, as of one who is the bearer of good tidings; but it was not Marcus Cunningham, it was only Sir James Ingram.

"I have come to tell you. I thought you ladies would be glad to hear!" he cried excitedly, shaking hands with them both. "It is all right, Cunningham has got in!"

"Oh!" gasped Elizabeth, a little wildly.

Mrs Bertram remarked calmly that she was glad to hear it, and sat smoothing down her tumbled hair with her hands.

"Yes," turning to Elizabeth eagerly, "it is a splendid victory!—a majority of one hundred and six votes,—more than we reckoned on. And indeed at one time things looked very ugly; the Snaggites in Hamerton were overwhelming, and the Irish vote very nearly swamped us, but the ballot boxes from the country districts pulled us round. You never saw such a scene of excitement in your life, when the poll was declared."

"And Mr Cunningham?" faltered Elizabeth. Now that the first disappointment of his not having come was past, she could begin to rejoice at his triumph; besides, had he not probably deputed Sir James to come and tell her? "Did he send you to us?" she asked timidly.

"Oh, no; not he! Poor Cunningham, he is about torn in pieces with congratulations; he hasn't been able to breathe or to speak yet to anybody. No, I came away at once from the

Town Hall, and thought I'd come round and tell you ladies the news, as no doubt you have been anxious to hear."

"You were always thoughtful and considerate, dear fellow!" murmured Mrs Bertram sweetly.

"Perhaps you will give me a cup of tea?"

"Of course. Elizabeth, go and order it. And don't you think, dear, you had better go to bed?—it is half-past ten. See to the tea, love; and wish Sir James good-night now, and then you can go upstairs."

This was the widow's little plan for getting her old lover to herself. Since he had chosen to present himself at such an hour, the lady was not minded to resign his attentions to her daughter. But Sir James was not at all pleased at the suggestion.

"Pray do not banish my sweet Elizabeth!" he cried. "I shall be most unhappy if she does not come back and talk to us. Promise me, you will not go to bed, my dear."

The old gentleman was opening the door for her with old-fashioned gallantry. Elizabeth smiled pleasantly at him.

"Certainly I will not go to bed. I am not at all sleepy, and I want so much to hear all about the election. I am only going to make you some tea."

But Mrs Bertram was very cross.

"Why could you not let her go to bed as I told her to do?" she asked quite sharply of her old admirer.

"Dear Mrs Bertram, you don't know how fond I am of Elizabeth," he answered quite simply. "I find in the child so fair a reproduction of the mother—"

Mrs Bertram was softened; anything like a compliment always put her into a good humour. To be sure, if the man wanted to marry her, it was only politic on his part that he should ingratiate himself with her grown-up daughter. She smiled, and tapped his hand playfully with her fan.

"I appreciate your kindness to my child," she replied graciously; "and, believe me, I understand your motives, and I enter into your feelings—"

Sir James was only a little old gentleman with a wrinkled and weather-beaten skin, but he blushed up all over his face like a boy at these words.

"Ah, my dear, kind friend," he cried, with enthusiasm, "you see, you understand, and you are good enough to smile upon me, and to encourage my presumptuous hopes? Ah, how can I ever thank you sufficiently?" And in his delight and gratitude he bent over the widow's white hand, that lay still upon his coat sleeve, and raised it to his lips.

"Hush!" whispered Mrs Bertram. "I hear Elizabeth coming back. Sit further away," she added, with a little hysterical giggle.

Sir James was not aware that he was sitting any nearer to the lady than decorum dictated, but he obeyed the gesture of her hand and removed himself a couple of inches off towards the other corner of the sofa.

Elizabeth came in carrying a little tray, the maid followed her with the kettle and the teapot. She proceeded to arrange the little repast of cakes and bread and butter upon a small table at the visitor's elbow.

"I am ashamed to allow you to wait upon me," said Sir James, watching her with admiring eyes.

"And I am delighted to wait upon you," she answered him back, smiling frankly and sweetly at him. She felt indeed as if she could not make enough of him for bringing her such good news about her lover.

"And perhaps," she thought, "perhaps presently it may even come to pass that *he* will come too! It is not very likely that I should go to bed!"

But Marcus Cunningham did not come; not although Elizabeth sat up for a whole hour longer, till Sir James wished them good-night and went, and Mrs Bertram, yawning loudly as soon as he was gone, declared herself unable to sit up any longer.

"He will come to-morrow!" said the happy child to herself, as she laid her head upon her pillow. "The very first thing after breakfast I shall begin to expect him; and then all will be right, and this long dreary week be forgotten for ever, for nothing more can ever divide us again for so long!"

And sweet anticipations lulled her last waking thoughts into dreams that were sweeter still. The long lashes swept her rose-tinted cheek, her pretty lips lay parted in a smile, and Elizabeth dropped like a tired flower into the silence and the slumber of the night.

Meanwhile in the adjoining room other fancies possessed the soul of her mother.

Mrs Bertram was congratulating herself upon her good fortune.

"It seems as if my luck had really turned at last!" she said to herself with satisfaction. "Young Brabberstone will marry Elizabeth,—I must bring that about as quickly as possible. It will be a good match for her, and though he himself is not very nice, yet for a girl with no particular looks, and none of the polish of society about her, it is really far better than could have been expected. Besides, marriage always improves a

man ; and she will humanise him—it is a real mission for her,” said the mother to herself piously. “Then when I have married her off, I shall marry dear James Ingram. After all, he was my first love—at least very nearly my first—and his constancy and devotion are quite touching ! And I know he has quite five thousand a year now since his mother died ; and I believe his wife had money too, so nothing could be nicer or more suitable for us both.”

And then Mrs Bertram blew out her candles, and got into bed. And she too soon slept the sleep of the just.

CHAPTER XI.

HER TRUST BETRAYED.

It is a week later.

The rain is coming down in sheets upon the bosom of the parched earth. All the garden is filled with mist and moisture, and with that sweet subtle odour which the grateful earth sends up in answer to the life-giving stream. The dripping leaves expand themselves in gladness, the dusty paths become cool and moist, the very birds hiding amongst the branches twitter new songs of thankfulness ; and if here and there a rose fall shattered and draggled, or a waxen lily droop spotted and stained to the earth, what does that matter in comparison with the great boon from the grey heavens, for which all Nature rejoices and sings praise ?

And so, in the same manner, although all East Silshire was filled with joy and gladness, it was perhaps but a very small matter that one little girl was left half broken-hearted. Life goes on—great things are done—great men arise in our midst—wonderful deeds are accomplished ; and if here and there a foolish woman's heart gets broken and bruised, why, what can that signify ? Nobody hears about it, nobody is any the worse, and nobody cares !

Elizabeth stood very straight and stiff, holding on to the back of a chair ; her face was of a strange unnatural whiteness, and there were great black circles all round her eyes, and straight hard lines at the corners of her mouth, lines that told of the bitterness and anguish of a real sorrow.

Opposite her stood Lady Brabberstone, looking very tall and haughty, and with a dark angry flush upon her handsome face, whilst a little further off Mrs Bertram sat weeping and wringing her hands upon the sofa.

Elizabeth held the chair between herself and her tormentors, as a sort of physical protection. Something dreadful was going on, and yet she seemed hardly to realise how dreadful it was. There was such a cold lump like a stone within her, that nothing they could say seemed to hurt her or to get near her; vaguely and dimly she understood what it was all about, and why the battle was raging, and yet over and over again a voice within her seemed to repeat,—

“Why can’t they let me alone?—what does it matter?—why do they torment me?”

In vain did her mother weep, and Lady Brabberstone revile. She was so cold and hard and numb within, that a callous weariness to it all was the only vestige of sensation they had the power to arouse in her.

Yet Lady Brabberstone was very angry,—more angry than she had ever been in her life before, for last night Elizabeth Bertram had refused to marry her son.

This is a crime a mother never forgives. Not even when, as in this case, she knows her son to be unworthy of a good girl’s affection, and when she is aware that he is a bad man, and will make a bad husband. All the maternal instinct arises within a woman’s heart at the slight to her child; all the venom of her nature comes with a gush to the surface, burning to revenge the insult offered to the creature who is, after all, most dear to her to the end of her life.

Lady Brabberstone had gathered her son in her arms, when, smarting with wounded vanity and disappointed hopes, he had flung himself upon his knees by her side, and poured forth the story of his repulse.

Thwarted passion and baffled longings had rendered him a very miserable object indeed.

“I *must* get her!” he had cried aloud, in his almost childish despair. “I shall go to the devil if she won’t have me! Go and tell her she *must*!”

And Lady Brabberstone, realising to the full what a wonderful thing it would have been for him to have gained her, promised that she would go and plead his cause for him.

But when she stood face to face with Elizabeth, she found that she did not know how to plead—she could only scold her.

“You are a bad, ungrateful girl! Have we not always been kind to you?—why should you not do this thing to please us?” she cried in her rage; and Elizabeth only answered,—

“Why should I sacrifice myself to please you?”

“Think of your mother!”

"Yes, Elizabeth, think of me!" echoed Mrs Bertram. "You are so selfish—you never have any consideration for me!"

"You ought to jump at such a marriage!" exclaimed Lady Brabberstone angrily.

"But then, you see, I don't!" replied the girl, with a scornful shrug of her shoulders.

"Oh, dear Elizabeth!" cried the mother, once more in a softened tone, "do not break my poor boy's heart. He loves you so much!—and consider what a good angel you might be to him! He would be a changed man if you would only be his wife!"

"I have no mission for reclaiming unprincipled young men," replied Elizabeth coldly and contemptuously; and at that Lady Brabberstone repented of her softness, and broke forth again into a paroxysm of ungovernable rage.

Elizabeth heard her unmoved. The torrents of reproaches, and abuses, and angry words fell upon stony ground; they had no power over her, and were of no avail to arouse anything save a dull disdain within her.

"I cannot marry your son," was all she said; and then she looked away idly and listlessly out of the window, and stared at the straight-falling raindrops that were splashing upon the terrace-walk and sinking into the parched lawn beyond it; and at the crimson roses, drooping dashed and sodden from their stalks.

Then all at once Lady Brabberstone said something—something that went through her like an electric shock, cutting into her very heart with knife-like keenness.

"You poor silly child, you thought, I daresay, that Marcus Cunningham was going to make love to you? Oh, how foolish you must be to have thought such a thing! Marcus, who plays with every woman as a toy—save the one to whom his real devotion is given!"

Oh, yes! she felt now she was not dead to all sensation yet! She felt it in every throbbing fibre of her being. A sudden flush covered her face—she turned breathlessly—she was too young and ignorant to hide her pain from her enemy.

"Who is that woman?" she cried brokenly; and Lady Brabberstone saw at last that she had hit home.

She laughed scornfully.

"Oh, my dear, don't look so savagely at me! Marcus is an old friend of ours, and I am very fond of him—he is not likely to marry yet, but everybody knows that he has been secretly attached to Rachel for a long time, so is it likely that he would
about any other girl? You need not think of

him, if that is what you are waiting for ; why, he went away the next day, and never even left a message for you."

"I know that he went away," said the girl, in an odd hard voice. She knew it indeed with all the anguish and bitterness of her heart.

All that day, the day after the Election, she had waited and watched for him, so hopefully at first, and then so sadly ; and at last despair had come to her when Rachel, who had ridden over for a chat at tea-time, and had recounted the many incidents of the previous day to her, with a flushed and happy face, added gaily,—

"And our new member has left us ! He has gone up to Liverpool to help with another election, and afterwards he is due in Cheshire ; but he has promised to come up to Scotland to us, and we are to meet him in August in London. He will be hard at work till then, but he hopes to get a holiday for the grouse."

And so Elizabeth had begun to see that Marcus Cunningham meant to desert her.

She had not clearly understood it at first, and every day she had watched for the post, still hoping and believing that she might at least get a letter from him. But nothing came to her ; and day after day went by, bringing her no sign and no token of his existence. Now, by the light of Lady Brabberstone's cruel words, she began to understand it all better. It was Rachel that he loved ! he had only amused himself with her, treating her as she said that he treated all other women—as a toy !

For a moment the hot blood rushed up into her face, leaving it again as suddenly to a deadly pallor.

She remembered, with a keen pang of most humiliating shame, that although he had made her confess her love to him, he had never spoken in words of his love to her, nor had he ever asked her to be his wife. She had given herself up to him so freely and unreservedly that she had never stopped to consider or to calculate the meaning of his caresses,—whilst he—oh, degradation beyond bounds !—he, no doubt, had laughed at her, whilst taking from her all that she had put into his hands !

One of Miss Austin's novels came back to her memory, where an unfortunate damsel is described as being "too free" in her manners, and too unreserved in her fashion of betraying the secrets of her heart.

Was that what Marcus Cunningham considered her ?

Elizabeth felt as if she would gladly die, and bury her head and her disgrace for ever under the churchyard sods.

Yet a certain pride came in her extremity to her aid, as the first bitter lesson of womanhood's direst experience impressed itself upon her wounded heart—Lady Brabberstone at least should not triumph over her in her anguish, she said to herself out of the depths of her despair.

She turned upon her coldly and almost contemptuously.

"What is it to me if Mr Cunningham has gone?" she said to her. You say he is Rachel's lover. Well, I hope they will both be very happy—tell Rachel so from me. As for me, it makes no difference. I do not like your son, and I shall not marry him now, or ever. Why cannot he and you take "No" when it is said so plainly?"

And in this fashion Elizabeth Bertram turned the tables upon the older woman of the world, and sent her away discomfited.

When she had gone away, burning with anger and indignation, turning round in the doorway, as she went out, to say,—

"Remember, I wash my hands of you for ever; I shall never be your friend again!" then Elizabeth had to endure the reproaches of her mother as well.

Mrs Bertram was quite sure that no mother upon the face of the earth had so wicked and ungrateful a child as her own,—that she had more to put up with than any wretched parent in Christendom, and that, without a doubt, her life would be shortened by her daughter's insubordination.

Then straightway she fell into hysterics, and the bell had to be violently rung for her maid, and her spirits of ether, and Elizabeth found herself patiently seated upon the sofa by her mother's side, chafing her cold hands, and bathing her forehead with *Eau-de-Cologne*. And all the time the pain within her went on; and that heart-ache which is worse to bear than any physical agony, ate its way with a cruel relentlessness into her very soul.

As yet she had no definite sensations, only that anguish within, and a stifled consciousness that her life was virtually over for ever.

"If I could only die and get away from it!" the poor child said to herself, as at length she was free to drag her weary footsteps upstairs to the solitude of her own little room.

But forsaken maidens seldom die for love's sake, and Elizabeth was young and strong, and when she flung herself face downwards upon her bed, she was as well aware as you and I are, that death does not come for the asking, and that the suffering she was undergoing would in no way shorten her existence, or hurry her with poetic justice into an early grave.

After a time she said as much half aloud to herself, moaning sadly to herself,—

“And I shall have to live forty, perhaps fifty, more years, and all the time with this horrible misery to endure!”

For she did not know either that there is a term set unto sorrow just as unto joy, and that the one is not allowed to last for ever any more than the other.

As to Mrs Bertram, she had quite a nice little afternoon of it, and managed, up to a certain point, to enjoy herself very much. For of course her maid, with praiseworthy discretion, took upon herself to do that which she knew her mistress secretly desired, and sent for Dr Fairgrave.

“I shall send for the Doctor, ma’am,” ~~had~~ said Dawks, who knew which side her bread was buttered as well as most women.

“Oh, no, Dawks; it is not worth while,” in feeble protest. “Oh, my poor heart!”

“Yes, ma’am, I *shall* send,” repeated Dawks, with decision.

“Oh, why trouble him? I shall be better soon. Oh dear, oh dear! these palpitations?”

And then Dawks rang the bell, and Dr Fairgrave was sent for.

He came dashing up to the door in the rain in his hooded phaeton, and when he came, he was of unspeakable comfort to the widow.

He sat by her side, and held her hand so sympathisingly whilst she poured forth the story of Elizabeth’s misdeeds, gazing into her face with such tender devotion the while, that Mrs Bertram began to feel quite soothed and happy; and when with his own hands he had poured out and administered the drops he had brought in his waistcoat pocket for her, mixing them himself with water, and lifting the wineglass tenderly to her lips, then Mrs Bertram began to feel quite well and comforted, and she laid back her head upon her sofa cushions with a gentle sigh of contentment.

“We must get you away to Sandypore, my dear lady,” murmured the Doctor, as he pressed the hand he still thought it necessary to retain. “A little change of air, and some warm sea baths, are quite essential, after this sad upset to your system. Can we not get you off to-morrow?”

“Oh, dear Doctor, I cannot bear to go away just now!” she whispered coyly.

She had been a flirt from her infancy, and although she had for the moment a far better game than a country doctor in her mind, yet she could not resist the temptation of keeping him dangling on too, for it was an amusement to her, and a salve

to her vanity, to fancy herself still run after by more men than one.

"I will run down and see you," replied the disciple of Esculap eagerly. "I will come from Saturday to Monday, if you will get me a room in the hotel. May I? Oh, say that I may!"

And then the lady smiled and looked down, and half hid her face behind her fan.

"Poor fellow!" she thought. "What a dreadful blow it will be to him when he hears I am going to marry Sir James Ingram! Poor me! I seem always destined to break some unfortunate man's heart. It's my fate, I suppose; some women can't help it. Ah, well! he is very fond of me, and I may as well have the comfort of him down at Sandypport. He understands my constitution so well, too; and if James wants to come, I can manage so that they shall not meet: he can make his visit in the middle of the week."

"Oh, yes, you may come for Sunday!" she said aloud, and smiled at him so sweetly that the Doctor went away quite elated.

"I shall pull that business off, I do believe!" he said to himself gleefully, as he gathered up his reins and drove away through the rain to visit a farmer who was laid up with a bad attack of gout. "There's nothing like patience in these matters; and I should say she must have got seven or eight hundred a year at the least, considering the style in which she lives; that, added to my professional income, will make us quite comfortably off; and she's got a long lease of the house too—the boudoir would make a capital consulting-room, and I might fit up Elizabeth's little room beyond as a den for myself. We must get that girl married off though—she'd be very much in my way. I shall put the screw on as soon as ever I am sure of my own footing. What a fool she must be to refuse Guy Brabberstone. Why, I'd engage to say that with a little judicious management, that is, by letting him have a long tether, that young man will drink himself into his grave in three years' time; and there she'd be, a young widow with a good jointure, and a handle to her name, free to marry again! Law, what fools girls are!" And the good man whipped up his ancient Rosinante, whose hard-worked bones showed painfully through her lanky frame, and proceeded merrily on his way, whistling a popular air between his teeth as he went.

But there came a damper to Mrs Bertram's spirits before the day was over, and this damper, strange to say, was administered to her in the person of Sir James Ingram.

"I have come to wish you good-bye," were his opening

words, looking round the room as he came in, in a vague, anxious way, which escaped not the widow's notice. Her heart sank down into her very shoes.

"Going away!" she repeated blankly. Surely he would not go without speaking!

But he did.

"Yes, the party at the Castle is breaking up—I am going up to town to-morrow morning. We are all dispersing; the Brabberstones themselves are off on Thursday, as you know. Where is Elizabeth?"

"Oh, she is lying down; she is not very well."

"Why, what is the matter with her?" he asked sharply. "Has that d—d young brute Brabberstone been worrying her?" for Sir James had not forgotten the little scene in the garden of ten days ago.

"Dear me, Sir James, what terrible language! Is Mr Brabberstone a brute? Really, we think him rather a nice young man—and so devoted to dear Elizabeth!"

Sir James scowled. Was the mother trying to egg him on, by upholding Guy as a possible rival! When a man has passed middle life, he becomes wary, even although he may be in love, and the notion that Mrs Bertram might be using another man's name to draw him on to commit himself, put his back up at once.

Sir James told himself he was not going to be caught in that way; and it angered him to think that Elizabeth's mother might be angling for him.

"*She* is as innocent and sweet as a daisy," he told himself—"but as for Alicia Bertram, oh, I know her of old! She sees my intentions plain enough, but if she thinks she is going to hurry me on into proposing before I feel inclined, she makes a very great mistake!"

"I think I must be wishing you good-bye," he said, getting up and holding out his hand.

Then Mrs Bertram felt rather desperate.

"But surely," she cried; "it is not good-bye for long? You will come back?"

"Well, that depends; you say you are going away yourself."

"Only for ten days to Sandport, to recruit my wretched nerves; surely *that* need be no bar to your return. Besides, for the matter of that, you could come to us at Sandport, any day *after* Monday. Some relations—dull cousins—are coming for Sunday, but on Monday they leave, and if you will come on Tuesday, I can get you a room at the hotel: it is very comfortable. We shall be in lodgings close by, and so very, very glad to see you."

"She became quite breathless in her eagerness. Sir James smiled.

"Will Elizabeth be glad to see me?" he asked.

"Elizabeth! Oh, yes, of course," replied Mrs Bertram, with a little surprise; and then she added sweetly, "the dear girl is always glad to welcome *my* friends."

Sir James looked down at his boots.

He would have liked to have said plainly to her,—

"I love Elizabeth, do you think she will have me?"

But that little feeling of suspicion, that her mother was manœuvring for him, kept him back.

"I will speak to her straight, in my own good time," he thought. "There shall be no third party, not even her mother, between us. I'm not going to be driven into a corner by an ambitious woman, who is up to the advantages of my marrying her. Elizabeth is as young and fresh as a child—youth is always true and candid—I will go straight to her when I want my answer; and I am not going to bind myself to any time or any place."

So he wished Mrs Bertram good-bye, and went away; and the faded beauty wiped her eyes when he was gone.

"He might have spoken, and put an end to my suspense," she told herself peevishly. "I believe he is afraid of Elizabeth laughing at him. Oh, if that wretched girl had only accepted Guy Brabberstone, how happy I should be! Perhaps it is not quite hopeless yet, and Guy may follow us to Sandypore. I have a great mind to write and tell him to come and see us there."

And before she went to bed she did so.

CHAPTER XII.

A GENIUS.

IN the very heart of London, yet as far removed from its gay and busy life as he was from the political fever of town and borough elections which shook both town and country to their very centre during the summer months; a young man, who, in one sense of the word, was very poor, was slowly but surely toiling his way up the straight and narrow ladder of fame.

I have said that he was poor, and, as far as this world's goods are concerned, Vere Sherwood was poor indeed. He lived in a mean little lodging in the neighbourhood of Bloomsbury Square, going forth diurnally to get his food, and that of the plainest and cheapest sort, at an eating-house round the

corner, and limiting himself to the barest necessities for his sustenance. His clothes were shabby and threadbare, his shirt-collar and cuffs frayed at the edges, and his whole outer man evinced beyond a doubt the depressed condition of his exchequer. Yet if he was poor in these things, in other matters young Sherwood was rich with an untold wealth; for God had set upon him the seal of a great gift, the stamp of that rare and wondrous mystery which sets a man apart for ever from his fellow-men, and which is a better possession than all the gold mines upon the face of the earth. Vere Sherwood had genius.

He was a born musician. He did not inherit it; neither by careful cultivation had it been fostered in him; no one ever put it into his imagination, no one even suspected it of him in his boyhood. He was, as a matter of fact, for a long time unaware of it himself. But, for all that, it was born in him; the breath of a Heaven-sent fire was in his soul as he entered upon this world of mercenary cares and sordid desires; and there it lay dormant within him, until in its own fitting time it was destined to break forth and carry him forward with the strong rush of its irresistible current.

Vere was the sixth son of his parents. His father was a country squire of straitened means and yearly-decreasing income; his mother the younger daughter of an earl, and the first cousin of a marquis; but acres now-a-days do not bring in money, neither do aristocratic connections help to push a struggling family of penniless young men on in the world. When Vere was born, he was duly christened after his maternal uncle and godfather, Lord Albert Vere, who would, it was hoped, remain a bachelor, and make him his heir, in consequence of the compliment; but before he was a year old, two more sons, in the shape of twins, were brought into the world, and upon this calamitous event poor Lady Clorinda, unable, no doubt, to cope with life any longer under such hampering conditions, gave up the struggle, and breathed her last in the utter weariness of despair. Then it came to pass that all her fine relations, having duly attended her funeral with becoming gravity of mein and suitable mourning hatbands, straightway forgot her husband's existence, and took no further notice whatever of her eight motherless boys.

Squire Sherwood was left to bring up his boys as best he could, and on the whole he did not do it badly. He gave them a good sound education at the grammar school in the county town hard-by; then he put them into decent professions, and made them understand that they must make their own way and depend upon themselves for their future.

Every time a son was launched into the world, a farm had to go to the hammer, or a slice of the park was sold "for building purposes;" but that could not be avoided, and the boys were on the whole not unworthy of the sacrifice. The eldest, because he was the eldest, went into the army; it was only a line regiment, but still he wore Her Majesty's uniform, and was looked upon as a great man and an uncommonly lucky fellow, by his brothers. As for them, they did what they could. One went into the merchant service, one became a doctor, another a solicitor, two went out to seek their fortunes in Australia, whilst another got into a tea business in Shanghai. When it came to Vere's turn to go out into the world, his father consulted him as to his tastes and inclinations, but Vere had apparently no inclinations.

"Anything you like, father," he had answered listlessly, in reply to the Squire's questionings, and without lifting his eyes from a little piece of paper upon which he was scribbling.

Now Squire Sherwood was not a man to take any notice of individualities of character, neither, had he been so, would it have been very possible for him to have entered into the spiritual and mental needs of each of his sons. They had all grown up together roughly and somewhat uncouthly, squabbling, fighting, shouldering one another as best they could, with no mother's hand to smooth, no sister's eye to sympathise with their disputes and their grievances. They had fallen out and made it up again, not without a certain genuine although un-talked-about affection for one another, yet without any of that gentle grace of courtesy, and that sobering influence of forbearance, which perhaps is not to be looked for in a womanless home. Amongst this noisy, self-asserting, and yet thoroughly manly tribe of youths, there had been no one to notice that Vere was made in a different mould to the others; that he shrank away from the rough shouts of the rest; that he preferred solitude to uproar, and meditation to clamour. His brothers called him sulky, his father sometimes wondered if he was delicate, but nobody discovered that he was of a more highly-strung nature and of a finer fibre than the others.

There was an unused lumber-room up in the attics of Sherwood House, and here an old piano belonging to the Lady Clorinda in her girlhood, and long unused by mortal fingers, had been stored away.

Lady Clorinda had never played anything more elaborate than "Weber's Last Waltz," or sung anything more interesting than "The Soldier's Tear;" and when the cares of maternity began to grow thick upon her, she had allowed even these en-

rapturing accomplishments to fall away into the limbo of the silent past.

Her rosewood cottage piano had long remained locked in a corner of the drawing-room, and had been utilised chiefly as an appropriate shelf for photograph frames, and bead and wax-work trophies. When the good lady died, Mr Sherwood, in his first grief and misery, had ordered that all that had belonged to his wife should be carried away out of his sight for ever. Accordingly her piano, her work-table, the davenport where she had sighed over her week's bills, and the armchair in which she was wont to knit baby's socks on a week-day evening, and doze over Paley's *Evidences of Christianity* on the Sabbath, were all carried away by the housemaid and the butler, and relegated to eternal oblivion amongst the rats and the spiders in the lumber attic. And here young Vere, when he was ten years old, found them, or rather it; for the work-table, the davenport, and the chair were nothing to him, whereas the piano became shortly everything to him in life.

How he learnt it, Heaven who taught him only knows, for genius gushes forth uninstructed, and does not require a teacher. But very soon he mastered the mechanical difficulties of the instrument, and divine strains began to pour forth in the loneliness of the lumber-room, strains that had they fallen even on unlearned ears must have struck the hearers with absolute amazement.

But, as a matter of fact, nobody did hear them, for Vere conducted his operations with the utmost secrecy. He used to steal up to his treasure when his father and brothers were out, or creep up in the middle of the night when the whole household were asleep; the house, too, was large and rambling, and there were only unoccupied rooms in the wing above which the lumber-room was situated, so that it was very easy for him to guard the secret of his life from the knowledge of his family. And Vere would have died sooner than betray it, for he was thoroughly ashamed of it. He knew that if his brothers found him out they would laugh at him,—would stigmatise him as a "muff," and a "sentimental spooney;" and that his father would frown, and bid him discontinue that "bosh," perhaps even might cause the door of his attic to be locked, and forbid him to enter it again.

Once indeed he overheard the old housemaid, who had lived in his mother's family before her marriage, tell his father, with tears in her eyes, that she was sure her ladyship's spirit came down to visit the house, for she sometimes heard the most "evenly and hangelic music" in the middle of the night,

"comin' as it were right out of the chimbleys," and Vere had trembled, and then had chuckled to himself as he heard the Squire tell Mary gruffly that her liver must be out of order, and she had better take a pill; for the good man had no belief in the supernatural, and Vere knew that he would not credit the story of any music, earthly or divine, proceeding from the neighbourhood of the chimneys.

One day Vere found a book of music—it was the score of an opera; and after that he very soon began to write down what he composed, although how he taught himself to read and to harmonise, is again one of those unfathomable mysteries which musical genius has presented over and over again in the history of the world.

Meanwhile he was lazy and inattentive at school, brought home bad marks and impositions, and caused much distress to his father by the reports sent home by his masters of his backwardness and slowness.

After each one of his father's remonstrances, sometimes angry, sometimes only reproachful, Vere, with tears would promise to do better. No one knew better than himself why it was that he was always lowest in his class, and could never fix his mind upon Latin quantities and Greek plays, thinking, as he was for ever, of something else. Then in a fit of repentance he would resolve to give up the secret temptation which drew his mind away from his studies, and to do better at school. As though it had been the advances of the Fiend Himself he would struggle and strive to crush his longings, and to keep away from the piano, undergoing perfect agonies of self-subjugation, in order to resist what he almost looked upon as the besetting sin of his character. But always in the end he gave in, and went back to his attic and his cracked piano and was happy—and got into worse and worse scrapes with his masters and his father.

"He will never do anything," said the head-master to Mr Sherwood, when he was sixteen; "you had better take him away, and put him into some business. I am sadly afraid that he will never do as well as his brothers; he has no power of application, and no capacity for anything but eating and drinking and sleeping," which showed how very little the Rev. Octavius Drummond, B.A., Fellow of Brazenose and Head Master of Queen Anne's Grammar School, Oldchester, understood of the subject he was talking about!

So Mr Sherwood asked Vere what he would like to do in the world.

"Anything you like, sir."

Mr Sherwood sighed.

"Have you no tastes, no bent, no preference for anything, Vere?" he inquired, in despair. "See how well your brothers are doing—have you no ambition to follow in their footsteps?"

Vere only shook his head.

"You seem to me to have no sense of responsibility whatever, no energy, and no go whatever in you. What are you scribbling there?"

Then Vere coloured guiltily all over his fair face, and shuffled the bit of paper he was writing upon underneath the table.

"Nothing, father."

"Yes, but it *was* something; what have you got there?"

"Only rubbish," and Vere crushed up the bit of paper in his hand, and thrust it deep down into his pocket, holding it tightly and jealously secreted there.

Well, as he would express no wishes of his own, the Squire was forced to decide for him. Horace, the third son, who was in a solicitor's office, wrote from London that he thought Vere could not do better than enter the same profession as himself, and mentioned the name of an eminent firm, who, for a moderate consideration, would be willing that the boy should be articled to them.

So a farm was sold, very badly, because farms now a days are a drug in the market, and a good many ricks of hay and much live stock had to be thrown in to make this one sell at all; and the upshot of it was that when he was just turned seventeen, Vere Sherwood was articled to a solicitor, and went up to London to begin his battle with the world.

A year and a half passed away. Vere never came home, and seldom wrote, and his few letters were unsatisfactory. He never went to see his brother Horace, and such introductions as his father had been able to give him, he had not availed himself of. There was a vague impression in his father's mind that he was going to the bad, and save that he continued to draw the small allowance he was able to give him, with quarterly regularity, he might have supposed that his sixth son wished to become forgotten in his father's house.

Then one day the revelation came.

Vere wrote a very long letter to the Squire. He told him, to begin with, that the law was a profession for which he had no vocation, and that he had left the office,—that certain of his friends, whose names he did not mention, had advised him to adopt the profession of music; and that it having been discovered that he possessed a fine tenor voice, he was going to dedicate himself wholly and solely to the cultivation of that

valuable article, and to the composition of a cantata for four voices, upon which he had been for some time engaged.

Had an infernal machine exploded in the front hall of Sherwood House, it could hardly have created a greater panic than did this letter.

That a gentleman's son should become a musician, an actor, or an artist, was at that time an occurrence far more rare than in the present day ; and that more especially a son of Sherwood of Sherwood, a nephew of the Earl of Kilvere, and a second cousin of the Marquis of Donought, should contemplate such an iniquity, was a thing absolutely unheard and unthought of ; it was an offence against nature, a crime whose heinous blackness no words can describe !

In his despair Squire Sherwood summoned to his aid those illustrious relatives of his wife's who had hitherto ignored his existence. Immediately the storm evoked, burst in its fury upon young Vere's devoted head.

The Earl wrote and told him that he was about to drag his dead mother's name in the mire ; the Marquis telegraphed to him not to be a fool ; his godfather Lord Albert came up to town, on purpose to curse him personally, and with unerring precision, fearing, no doubt, to entrust his maledictions either to the penny post or the sixpenny telegraph office, whilst all his aunts, the Ladies Vere ; and his second cousins, the Ladies Idell, sent him post-cards of admonition and warning.

Vere's answers to them one and all were characteristic and emphatic. He wrote to the Earl of Kilvere that he hoped to exalt instead of lower the name of the revered mother who had brought him into the world ; he telegraphed to the Marquis of Donought briefly that he was not a fool ; and he sent post-cards to all his aunts and first cousins bearing one sentence uniformly :—"Am very sorry to offend you ; will you kindly lend me £5 ?" Needless to say, not one of them received any reply. With his uncle and godfather, Lord Albert Vere, whose visit he unfortunately received in person, he had greater difficulty in dealing. Yet even to him he succeeded at last in conveying the fact that as from the hour of his mother's death to the present day he had done nothing for him, he did not consider that he owed him any consideration, nor should he alter his intentions for anything that he could say to him.

"I wash my hands of you," said Lord Albert, as he left the small meagrely-furnished room.

"I think you did that, my Lord, some years ago," retorted Vere ; and then the door slammed, and he saw his noble rela-

What he found harder to battle against were the prayers of his father, and the remonstrances of his brothers.

"Do not disgrace me in my old age," cried the Squire plaintively.

"I do not mean to disgrace you, sir. I trust the day will come when you will be proud of me!"

When he spoke to his brothers about the profession of music, they laughed him to scorn.

"It is no profession at all!" they cried; "it is not the occupation of a gentleman, it is the employment of a beggar!"

"It is the noblest profession on earth!" he had replied with indignation. "And you will beg of me, before I shall have to beg of you!"

And then they all went their way, and dropped him. Moreover, his father stopped his allowance. After that Vere Sherwood struggled on, all alone and with no other help than his own determination, and the great genius that burnt like a living flame within him.

Was it likely that they could quench that fire with a few scornful and angry words?—that they could beat back that indomitable force, or extinguish that God-given light?

He was happier perhaps when he had cut himself adrift, and had no one to look to but himself. He saw the last of them, as it were, and he was not sorry to be left alone. He regretted none of them save only his father. And often it gave him a pang when he thought of the old man who had begged him not to disgrace him.

"Neither I will," he said to himself, with a full heart. "Pray God he may live until I can show him what there is in me."

For by this time he knew what it was that was within him, and others had begun to discover it too.

There was a certain club which Vere frequented, where professionals and authors and artists alone were to be met with, where the greatest actors consorted with the meanest scribblers, and world-famed composers and unknown singers met upon an equal footing. Here men were valued as God intended us to value one another, not for what they possessed, or what connections they had, but for what they could do. Every man found his own level at the Seraphian. Nobody who had talent could long remain in obscurity, and nobody who was a mere charlatan was permitted to continue in ignorance of the fact. At the Seraphian, nobody knew, and if they had known they would not have cared, that Vere Sherwood was the grandson of a long line of earls, and that the present Marquis of Donought

was his mother's first cousin ; if he had mentioned such a thing, he would have been met with the contempt he would have deserved, but, as a matter of fact, he had not the faintest idea of alluding to his aristocratic relatives. What did attract notice at the Seraphian were those things about him which he owed neither to his blue blood, nor yet to his education.

It became rumoured amongst the magnates of the Club that a young man of rare promise had been lately added to their numbers. Somebody had heard him sing—somebody else had marvelled at his improvisations. Soon the matter was inquired into, and Vere's talents were brought to light. A great maestro took him up, and volunteered to give him lessons for nothing. A musical director asked him to write an operetta. A theatrical manager offered him a part in an opera about to be produced. Vere refused to run before he could walk. He gave up three whole years to study, to poverty, and to obscurity, and at the end of that time he suddenly appeared in public.

He gave a series of recitals—instrumental and vocal—at a popular concert hall. There was a crush to go and hear him. The papers were full of his name. Something was discovered in what he had written, which was different to the common-placeness of modern compositions ; and the perfection of his rendering, and the beauty of his singing, created a widespread impression. Soon engagements of all kinds began to pour in upon him, and he found his feet firmly set upon the lowest rungs of the ladder he had set himself to climb.

But what was almost as remarkable about this young man as his talent, was the wonderful power of self-control and self-repression which was in him—the capacity which he displayed for keeping himself in hand as it were. His ambition was of that high order that is not satisfied with small successes, and his sense of honour was so exalted that he declined to indulge himself by the profits of his exertions. For the first two years that Vere began to make money by his voice and by his compositions, he reserved only what was barely sufficient for his existence, and devoted the remainder to paying off his debts. His father's anger had left him penniless, so that during the three years he had devoted to study he had been forced to live entirely upon the willing loans of his friends. These loans, many of them from struggling men nearly as poor as himself, he made it his first duty to pay off, and as a man who is young and strong, and has a healthy appetite, cannot live for three years upon nothing, it followed that the list of his debts was a long one, and that he was no richer for some time after his

compositions had begun to sell, and his talent to be recognised. Moreover, he held back from taking all he could get. To be a popular tenor singer was not sufficient for him. He was glad that he had a voice, but it was as a composer that he chiefly desired to become famous. His cantata had been succeeded by a work which was of greater magnitude, and which expanded itself to the dimensions of an oratorio—until that could be given to the world upon a wide platform, and until the voice of the great public pronounced it a success, Vere knew that his chief strength was yet unknown. His voice, which brought him in daily money, was only a means to the great end of his existence.

A smaller nature would have taken the success of the hour, accepted the social triumphs, and been content with the adulation of the London musical world. But Vere's nature was not small, and he could not be satisfied with small things. Moreover, he had no vanity—adulation affected him not, and to turn his head was impossible; simply because it was ever before his mind how much greater his Art was than himself, and how far short his triumphs fell of his secret ambitions.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WOMAN HE LOVED.

ABOUT this time there befel Vere Sherwood something which might have proved a serious disaster to him, but from the danger of which he in the end escaped, if not altogether unscathed, yet not materially the worse in any way.

Simply, he fell in love.

He was a good-looking young fellow, tall and broad-shouldered, and with a fresh open face that was in itself a recommendation. He had honest and almost beautiful eyes, and if his features were not especially well-formed or regular, they had at all events the charm of a pleasant smile, and the attraction of an agreeable expression. His mouth and chin were squarely cut, and his brow was broad and full of character—he was altogether the sort of young man whom women never fail to like and to notice kindly.

And there was one gracious and beautiful woman who did notice him much and often. He met her frequently at houses where he went to sing. She admired him as a musician, she liked him as a man—perhaps she showed her preference too plainly, or perhaps only he mistook the liking for a warmer feeling.

With all the ardour of a deep and strong nature, Vere Sherwood loved this gracious and dark-eyed girl, the lines of whose life lay far outside his life, and whose place in the world was not amongst its workers, but amongst the whirl of its butterflies of fashion and pleasure.

It seemed to him that he was understood, and that if his love was not accepted, it was at all events not disdained. Whenever he met her, her dark eyes lit up with pleasure at his approach, and her lips parted in a smile of glad welcome. She seemed always to prefer his society to that of other men, and to make an effort to go to the houses where she would be likely to meet him. He talked to her of things he had never spoken of to any living being before,—of his secret hopes and ambitions, of the certainty of fame and success which he felt within him, and of the long struggle which he had waged so bravely against poverty and opposition. In all this she appeared to sympathise deeply and sincerely. Her interest in his future was apparently unbounded. She seemed to glory in his genius, and in the applause and admiration which it evoked.

Perhaps it was only that it was all new and strange to her,—that he was different to other men,—a something quite apart from the young Guardsmen and Foreign Office clerks who crowded round her nightly in Belgravian drawing-rooms. Or perhaps it was only the great rush of his own audacious love and its self-delusions which caused him to over-estimate the meaning of her manner and her words. Afterwards, when it was all over, he tried to think so, so that he might not judge her too hardly, might not suffer too keenly from the punishment of his folly.

For it was left to this woman, whom he had loved so blindly, to deal him the cruellest and hardest blow he had ever in his life experienced.

One evening he met her at a crowded evening party.

North Lodge was a charming house, surrounded by extensive pleasure grounds, in the Regent Park. The drawing-rooms and supper-rooms opened on to the lawn, which was illuminated with Chinese lanterns and fairy lights. The weather was hot, and the July stars were clear. The people turned out in groups and in couples into the balmy night air—balmy even in London.

Vere had been singing even better than usual. Never had his voice appeared so mellow and rich ; he had sung his own compositions, and never had he been so veritably inspired by the genius of his music. He had been rapturously applauded and encored. Shouts of admiration had gone up in a very tumult of excitement. When he moved away from the piano

hands were stretched forth to grasp his,—great people had pressed forward to be introduced to him. Society indeed had always smiled upon him. Vere had never been called upon to endure the slights and the disdain which fall to the lot of many men whose position is insecure and whose importance is unrecognised.

Now, for the first time in his life, shame and humiliation were to be forced upon him.

"Let us get out of all this," he whispered to the woman he loved, as he reached her chair with difficulty through the crowd. She rose at once, and they went out together into the shadows of the garden.

Then the triumph of the moment, the certainty of the future, added to the sweet mystery of the starlit night, fired his brain, so that the poor musician forgot who and what he was, and who was the woman he was with. He only remembered that she was the woman he loved,—that her rich beauty filled his senses, her noble mind satisfied the craving of his higher nature, whilst her sweet tenderness realised at the same time every fond dream of his heart.

"What a triumph!" she said to him, leaning with a sort of delirious *abandon* upon his arm—"are you not glad?"

"Yes," he answered passionately, "I am glad,—glad for you, because my triumphs are yours—because, for your sake, fame is precious to me, and the name that I ask you to share shall not be one that you will be ashamed to own."

She drew back from him, scared and frightened.

"I do not understand," she faltered.

But the floodgates of the young man's passion were let loose—there was no stopping him now.

"Do you not?—oh, then, let me tell you, my darling," he murmured, in a low thrilling voice—not loud, but deep and full. "Why should I hide it from you, since you must know it in your heart that I love you, I love you! Nay, do not shrink from me, my own; have I not seen the answer to my love in your dear eyes, over and over again.

"Mr Sherwood, you must be mad!"

The words fell like ice upon his soul—he was speechless.

"You forget yourself!" she added stiffly.

"I forget?—forget myself?—forget what, Rachel?"

"Forget what I am sorry to be forced to remind you of—that your position in life does not warrant your addressing me as—as a lover."

That is what she said, but even as she spoke it, she hated and loathed herself for the words.

As to Vere, he could scarcely believe that he heard her aright.

"You mean that I am poor?" he asked, not yet gathering the full meaning of her words. "But I shall not be always poor; even now, I am beginning to reap."

"No, I do not mean poverty," she interrupted impatiently. "Why do you make me say what your good sense should have understood? it is not your poverty—it is your—your calling."

"You mean my profession,—that I am a singer—a musician? Is that what you mean to say?"

"Yes; whereas I—"

"You are Lord Brabberstone's daughter—I see!"

And then a terrible silence fell between them.

Never to this girl had he spoken of his connections,—of the lords and ladies who were his uncles and aunts,—of the marquis who was his mother's cousin. They had all disowned him, and cast him off. To speak of them would have been mere empty and vulgar boasting, such as was not within the compass of Vere Sherwood's nature. His first thought now was that he was glad he had never mentioned his mother's people to Miss Brabberstone. "I should have been sorry if she had valued me one iota the more for that," he thought. And then there came the rush of a terrible disenchantment upon him, the headlong downfall of an idol, the sudden destruction of a lovely dream. The agony and the bitterness of it went like a flood over his soul. He could not speak. They leant together against the stone balustrade of the terrace, and a bed of mignonette flung up its sweet odours from below. The strange yellow lanterns gleamed across the lawn and amongst the shrubberies; behind them was the lighted house. They could hear the distant strains of a violin, and the murmur of the voice of the crowd; whilst countless couples passed to and fro around them, some murmuring low in happy oblivion of all save one another, some laughing aloud as they went by. Only this couple said nothing—not a word.

Once he turned and looked at her, slowly and deliberately, with eyes that scanned with a bold audacity such as ten minutes ago would never have filled them, every detail of her beauty,—the white throat, the smooth ivory-like arms, the bent and burning cheek, the dim outlines of the rounded bosom beneath the laces of her dress. She did not meet his gaze, but she cowered and shrank as he looked, burying her face in her hands. She *knew*, better than if she had seen it, that there was *contempt* in his eyes!

"Oh, do not be angry—forgive me!" she said brokenly at last. Never had the proud

and adulation, felt so humbled and mean in her own eyes ; never had the man she loved—for she did love him—appeared so far above herself in all that constitutes the true nobility of a manly nature.

“Do not be angry, forgive me!” she repeated once more, and then she glanced up into his face. Even in the pale glimmer of the stars and the lamps she was startled to see how cold and hard that face was. She had never seen him look so before—all the youth and the buoyancy was gone out of it, only bitterness and scorn were left.

“I am not angry,” he said, quite gently ; “only you have taught me something I did not know before, and the lesson is not a pleasant one. But as to forgiveness, that is another matter. Oh, no, I cannot forgive you!”

“I did not mean it—forget it!” she pleaded weepingly. “I only wanted to explain—”

“Explain nothing, pray,” he hastened to say coldly. “I understand you perfectly—good-bye. I will not forget myself again ; and I can even find it in my heart to pity you—” and then he bent towards her suddenly, and added quickly—“to pity you because you love me.”

And so that chapter of his life was closed, and Vere Sherwood went back with his whole heart and soul to the Art which he swore should henceforth be his only mistress. He was a trifle colder and harder than before,—looked at the world and its ways somewhat more bitterly than of old, and said a cruel word now and then concerning its women. That was all. But as for his music, that became a more absorbing passion than ever. His oratorio was sung before princes at the Albert Hall ; musical honours flowed in upon him thickly ; his songs became the rage, his name was spoken of with respect in the first rank of artists, and a whole year went by since Rachel Brabberstone dealt him that bitter blow beneath the stars, and to all appearance Vere Sherwood had forgotten her existence.

It was the month of July again, most of the country elections were over ; town, that had been empty as September, was filling again spasmodically for the last gasp of a ruined season. The summer sales were in full swing, and amongst others Lady Brabberstone and her daughter were completing their purchases before migrating north for August.

The barouche, laden with parcels, left the door of a certain splendid and ever attractive establishment in Oxford Street, and drove slowly down Bond Street.

wretched men toiling slowly up the street with boards on either side of them.

Like letters of fire those placards burnt themselves into her eyes and her brain.

This Day, July 29th, at 3-30,

MR VERE SHERWOOD'S RECITAL

AT

ST JAMES'S HALL.

That was what she read—that was all she saw.

"Mamma, we have nothing to do—cannot we go to St James's Hall? It seems a good concert; and do you remember, we used to meet Mr Sherwood last year?"

"Did we? I am sure I don't remember; one meets so many men—of that class particularly."

Rachel shrank.

"I should like so much to go in and hear him sing—he writes such lovely songs," she said presently.

"My dear, how can you be so foolish! I have the Army and Navy Stores to go to—and Shoobred's, and Mudie's, and a dozen different places! Have you forgotten that we go up to Scotland in three days, and I have not done a quarter of my shopping? How can you expect me to go to a stupid concert?"

"And I, who hate all the shopping so!" sighed Rachel wearily. "Can you not go to the Stores, and to Shoobred's, and Mudie's, without me, mamma? Can you not drop me at St James's Hall, and come and fetch me when you have done it all?"

It was all over and done with for ever—but oh! if she might only see him once more!—if she might only, far off and unseen herself, look once again upon him whom, by her own fatal and terrible blunder, she had lost for ever.

Her father and mother had known nothing of her friendship and intimacy with this man; it did not occur to Lady Brabberstone that Rachel had any personal motive in wishing to go to this concert. She glanced at her child, Rachel looked white and tired.

"London is too much for her in this hot weather," thought the careful mother.

"Very well," she said aloud, "you shall go to your concert, child; and you need not hurry away—I will leave Edward at

So Rachel was dropped at the door of the concert hall, and the footman was left to wait for her.

She sat alone far back in the stalls; she saw him; she heard him sing; she thought he had not seen her, and when he was nearing the end of his last song, in the second part of the programme, she thought she would slip away quietly—there was, in fact, nothing left for her to wait for. She felt sick and giddy; she longed to go away somewhere, where it was dark and still, so that she might hide her pain. She got out of the concert room. It did not occur to her that he could have seen her; but Vere had the eyes of an eagle; he always saw a familiar face in the upturned sea of heads before him, was it likely that he would overlook Rachel Brabberstone's?

He had seen her come in, in fact.

When she was outside in the passage waiting in the stream of people for the cab to be found for her, suddenly he stood before her, with outstretched hand.

"Come in here—I want to speak to you," he said shortly, and drew her into a small private room behind some green-baized doors.

After a whole year they stood face to face once more.

CHAPTER XIV.

VISITORS AT SANDYPORT.

IF Elizabeth Bertram had in spirit rebelled against the tedium of her daily perambulations upon the terrace walk at home, she most assuredly did so twenty times more when the monotonous diurnal exercise was transferred to the asphalted little esplanade of Sandypport-on-Sea.

Sandypport called itself a watering-place, and plumed itself upon a certain amount of fashion during the summer months. It talked, upon placards half as big as itself, about its Parade, Bathing Establishment, and Band, with added commentaries concerning its "First-class Hotel for Families." But, as a matter of fact, the Parade was only a pathway on the top of the cliff; the Bathing Establishment was of a most primitive description; and the Hotel a mere pothouse frequented by commercial travellers. There was indeed a band which performed every evening upon an arid space miscalled "the green." It played horribly out of tune, and its *repertoire* was of so limited a nature that it repeated the same airs every evening, with a persistent monotony utterly wearisome both to flesh and spirit.

Sandyport was nothing more, in fact, than a village with a row of green-shuttered lodging-houses facing the sea, which were frequented by such of the gentry and clergy of Silshire whose means or time did not permit them to take a more extended outing.

Mrs Bertram and Elizabeth often came here ; always for a week or two in the hot weather, and often again to escape the fall of the leaf in October.

Elizabeth used to walk up and down that esplanade till she felt as if she should go mad with it. She would look at the little mean town, at the dismal houses, the little squat church tower, the donkey chairs, and the goat carriages standing idle in the sunny road, until she hated them all ; then she would turn her eyes towards the sea ; the strip of yellow sands, with the little children digging upon them, and the nurse-maids sitting by, until that spectacle too became loathesome and abominable to her ; the very sea indeed failed to charm or please her, and all the mystery of its changing face was powerless to impress her with its beauty.

For there are some people to whom the sea tells no story save that of an endless melancholy, who find no pleasure in watching the rolling waves, and ebbing tides, and upon whom the incessant movement of the vast shield of ocean's waters produces no sensation save that of monotony. Elizabeth perhaps was one of these ; Sandyport, sea and all, bored and wearied her beyond description.

She did not love it any better now than she had done on former occasions, for she was more actively unhappy this time than she had ever been at any previous period that she had been condemned to visit it. Elizabeth knew that her lover had deserted her. He could never, in fact, have considered himself to be her lover at all ; he had just amused himself at her expense, and gone away, and forgotten her. That was all.

To how many women does not a similar story happen ? Of how many girls who are sad-eyed and pale, and droop for a year or two of their bright young lives, could not the same little record, so short and yet so full of meaning, be spoken ? She has had " a little disappointment," it is whispered amongst the kind elderly women who live about her. She wants a change of air, and to be cheered up and petted and treated tenderly, and so by degrees she gets over it, and begins her life again, a little more sadly, no doubt, but often none the less bravely.

So it was with Elizabeth, only in her case nobody sympathised with her or petted her, because nobody knew anything about

heart, was far too much absorbed in her own affairs,—too much encased and encrusted in selfishness, to concern herself about her child, or even to notice that all was not well with her.

So Elizabeth bore her trouble alone as best she could. The sad little mouth drooped more sadly than ever, and the heavy-lidded eyes grew very weary and sorrow-laden; and by degrees, as the days went by, a something new and strange happened to them both—they became what they had never been before, not so much pathetic, as somewhat hard and bitter; the soft womanly light died out of the pretty grey eyes, and when she smiled, the smile was a little bit cynical.

For if she had been foolish, she was not, at all events, devoid of pride; and after a little while pride woke up within her, and helped her to overcome her grief. Alas! at what a cost? So many good things died away in Elizabeth's heart at this time—her sweet child faith—her innocence of wrong—her golden illusions of love and happiness—all this was the price she paid for having loved Marcus Cunningham too well, and trusted in him too much.

Do such men ever know or realise the mischief they do, I wonder? Do they ever understand the responsibility they incur, and the terrible wrong they do for life to a woman's whole nature, by their thoughtlessness and heartlessness?

Presently Elizabeth made up her mind that if she could only get away from her home, and begin a new life, she would learn to be happy.

"I should like to show him how little I care!" she said to herself desperately; and she was so driven by her thoughts, and by her pain, that she even turned it over in her mind whether she could not manage to marry Guy Brabberstone. She shuddered a little when she thought about him, but she went the length of debating the question with herself. Mercifully, however, two things preserved her from such a suicidal action, and the chief of them was the incessant persecution which her mother kept up upon this subject.

Day after day Mrs Bertram reproached and reviled her for her folly in throwing aside such a glorious chance; day after day she bemoaned her fate in being the mother of so ungrateful and obstinate a daughter; and day after day she implored her to reconsider her decision, and allow her to summon Guy back again. This course of proceeding had fortunately the effect of arousing in Elizabeth to the uttermost that spirit of antagonism which her mother was always capable of awakening within her. She became as stubborn as a mule, to which interesting animal indeed Mrs Bertram was never tired of comparing her.

Then Mrs Bertram, who was foolish as well as unprincipled, committed an absolutely fatal error. Without saying a single word of it to Elizabeth, she wrote to Guy Brabberstone in London, and recommended him to come to Sandypore and try his luck once more. Dear Elizabeth, she wrote, seemed dull and out of spirits, apparently she was fretting. No doubt she regretted her foolish and precipitate decision. To the best of her belief, the dear child would change her mind if Guy would give this proof of his sincerity and devotion, etc., etc.

The very next day, as the mother and daughter issued forth from the green-verandahed lodging house for their afternoon stroll, Elizabeth gave a swift glance along the deserted Esplanade, and perceived an unaccustomed and unwelcome figure coming along it. From the instant that she caught sight of Guy Brabberstone's shambling form in its suit of grey dittos, and perceived beyond a doubt his mean and unwholesome-looking face, she saw it all, and understood the trick which her mother had played upon her.

"This is your doing, mother!" she cried, coming to a dead stop and facing her mother, with anger-blazing eyes. "You have told him to come!"

Mrs Bertram feigned surprise, and put up her eyeglass.

"Dear me, Elizabeth, what is the matter? Why, I do declare here is Guy Brabberstone coming along the Esplanade! The dear fellow must have come all the way from London to see us. How good of him!"

But Elizabeth knew that he would not have come uninvited.

"Did you, or did you not, write and ask him to come?" she questioned furiously.

"Why—Oh, of *course* not, my love."

But Elizabeth knew quite well that it was a lie.

"You may see him yourself then. I refuse to speak to him," she said.

The Honourable Guy Brabberstone was now within earshot. He came up prancing and grimacing, with a grin of triumph upon his dissipated and ugly face. When he was within ten yards of them, Elizabeth turned short round, and marched back into the house without a word, slamming the door pretty sharply behind her as she went in.

Then Mrs Bertram had a *mauvais quart d'heure* of the very worst description. It was not in truth at all worse than she deserved, but it was decidedly very bad indeed.

"That is the second time your daughter has deliberately insulted me!" cried Guy angrily. "She slapped my face once, and I forgave her, and now she has turned her back on me—d—n

her ! ” And then he fell to work, and cursed, and swore, and blasphemed, raining oaths down upon his would-be wife and his would-be mother-in-law, and appealing to his Creator in such a terrible fashion that Mrs Bertram screamed and would have fled, only that Guy caught hold of her by her wrists, and forced her to listen to him. The hearing was not good, for Guy was in a thundering rage, and when Guy was in a rage, his language was anything but choice, and on the present occasion he did not mince his epithets, or pause to consider that he was mentioning things and using expressions which are not usually given utterance to in the presence of ladies.

When he had quite done, he turned on his heel and left her, walking straight back to the inn, where he picked up his bag, and then on to the station, where he took the very next train back to London, and Sandypport saw him no more.

As for Mrs Bertram, the horrible effect which her visitor had upon her may be estimated by the fact that she fell straight down flat on her back upon the grass plot in front of the lodging-houses, and for the first and only time in all her life veritably and actually swooned dead away.

Elizabeth saw her from the windows, and came running out to her help, followed by Dawks and the woman of the house, and between them they carried the poor lady in and laid her on the sofa. When she began to revive, she fell into violent hysterics, and seemed so ill that Dawks scarcely waited for Elizabeth's suggestion, but ran hurriedly upstairs for her bonnet, and flew out to the post-office to telegraph for Dr Fairgrave.

By mutual consent the name of Guy Brabberstone ceased after that to be mentioned between the two ladies.

Upon opening her eyes, Mrs Bertram had indeed murmured with a shudder,—

“That fiend ! ”

And Elizabeth had answered soothingly,—

“Never mind, mother, he is gone ; he will never come back.”

And Mrs Bertram could not now say that she desired his return. After that they did not talk about him any more.

Dr Fairgrave came down with professional promptness, and was, as Mrs Bertram said, “all tenderness and attention.” Elizabeth got away by herself out of the house as much as she could for that day. Dr Fairgrave's unctuous expression, his obsequious manner, and the servile and oily flattery which he poured forth into her mother's ears, disgusted and revolted her. She wondered how her mother, who was a lady by birth and by association, could tolerate the presence and conversation of

this vulgar and common person. When she came back from her solitary walk, the doctor was gone, and her mother was sitting, tranquillised and soothed, by the open bow-window in the sitting-room.

She smiled when Elizabeth came in, and called her to her and kissed her.

This was so unusual an event that Elizabeth was slightly mystified.

"I am glad to see you better, mother," she said.

"Yes, my dear, I am thankful to say I feel much better. I must say that, give him his due, no man has ever understood me so well as Dr Fairgrave does."

Elizabeth took this remark, of course, from a medical point of view, and remarked dubiously, as she began to pour out the tea, that she supposed he was considered clever.

Mrs Bertram sighed a little, then she smiled to herself with a little way she had of smiling when she was pleased, holding her head on one side, and looking down as she smiled. Elizabeth knew that smile very well indeed; it generally preceded any little record of past successes and conquests that her mother was about to communicate to her. She looked up expectantly, but nothing was said.

Only after a long pause Mrs Bertram was heard to murmur below her breath,—

"Poor, poor fellow!" then a sigh; then, after another lengthened pause, "Poor dear fellow!"

Elizabeth supposed that her parent's mind must be running upon some old love of her girlhood, the question in her own mind was therefore merely—*which?*

It did not certainly occur to her to connect these disjointed ejaculations of mingled love and pity with the fat and flabby form of the departed medico. She could not have imagined that either sighs or smiles could be wasted upon so common and unpoetical an individual.

Two days later an event occurred to herself which was of sufficient interest to cause her to forget Dr Fairgrave and his visit, and even the spontaneous embrace which her mother had bestowed upon her.

It was just after lunch, and, according to a well-established custom, Mrs Bertram settled herself upon the sofa for her mid-day nap. Elizabeth drew down the blinds, and arranged the cushions at her mother's back, and, retiring to the back room, was prepared to derive what interest she could from an odd volume of the *Spectator*, which she had unearthed from an unused cupboard full of books she had found upon the landing outside.

Suddenly her mother said to her,—

“Have we got a time-table of the trains, Elizabeth?”

“No, mother. I don’t think so.”

“Then put on your hat, my dear, and go down to the station, and see if you can get one. I am most anxious to find out all about the Sunday trains.”

Elizabeth vaguely marvelled why, and who it was that her mother expected on Sunday. She consoled herself, however, by reflecting that it could not possibly be Guy Brabberstone, and, failing him, it did not signify very much to her who was coming.

She went upstairs for her hat, and went out slowly and leisurely in the direction of the station.

It was a lovely, breezeless afternoon; the sea was of a deep amethyst blue, flecked with great patches of emerald green. A few white-sailed ships hovered almost motionless upon the horizon. The heavens were cloudless, the sun beat down fiercely upon the white cliffs and the arid treeless land. It was a country of white chalk and yellow cornfields, of wide dusty roads and shadeless stone walls—there was nothing lovable or beautiful about it in Elizabeth’s eyes; she put up her white sunshade, and held it down as low as she could over her head, so as to see as little of it as possible. It was all glaring and dazzling and bare. She longed for a sight of the meadows, and the willow-bordered stream, and the cows munching their way through the buttercup grass at home; and then she thought of the garden and the tulip tree, and of Marcus Cunningham, bending low over her chair, and murmuring tender words into her ear. She shivered even in that scorching sunlight.

“Ah, it is all hateful and dreadful!” cried the poor child aloud in her misery. “Here, there, it is all the same, all full of horrid grinding pain! Oh, if there was only any place on the face of the earth where I could forget it and begin again!”

For she did not know yet that we carry our sorrow with us wherever we go, and that it is not change of place or scene, or new faces, or fresh things, that can quench it, but only old Time, with his slow and lagging footsteps, who in mercy carries away our burdens with him, if only we are patient, and content to wait for him.

And then as she walked, she found herself near the station, and met a small crowd of people hurrying down from it into the little town.

A down train was just in.

Suddenly somebody stopped in front of her, and a familiar voice cried out,—

"Why, my dear Elizabeth, is this indeed you?" and lifting the big sunshade that had shaded her sad young face, Elizabeth found herself face to face with Sir James Ingram.

She was glad to see him—very glad! He was always kind and gentle, and fatherly to her. Her face brightened at once, and her gladness shone in her eyes.

"Oh, Sir James!" she cried quite joyfully, "how delightful to see you! Have you come down to pay us a visit?"

"Yes; I have just run down for an hour or so. Where is your mother?" looking about somewhat apprehensively.

"Mother is at home. She is dozing a little—but she will be very glad to see you. We live close by."

"Oh, we had much better not disturb her," he said hurriedly. "I can see her presently—or—but, in fact, it is principally *you* I want to see, Elizabeth. Can we not go for a walk?"

"It is rather hot to walk," remarked Elizabeth dubiously.

"Oh, well then, let us sit down. Can't you take me somewhere where we can sit in the shade and talk?"

So Elizabeth took him down upon the sands, where they sat down together upon a brown rock, under the shadow of the cliffs.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS BERTRAM'S SUNDAY AFTERNOON.

RATHER more than an hour later Elizabeth burst somewhat violently into the little lodging-house sitting-room on the cliff.

Mrs Bertram was wide awake, sitting up on the sofa, and evidently not in the best temper in the world.

"Where in the name of fortune have you been all this time, Elizabeth? I began to think you were lost, or drowned, or something—"

"I will tell you presently," said the girl, as she began to take off her gloves and hat, laying them upon the table.

There was a strange look in her face; she was flushed, and a little trembling; her eyes looked unnaturally bright and shining, and there was altogether an aspect of suppressed excitement about her.

Mrs Bertram was vaguely aware that something unusual must have taken place.

"Why on earth can't you speak?" she exclaimed crossly. "Why have you been out so long? and where is the time-table I sent you for?"

"The time-table!" cried Elizabeth, looking up. "Oh, dear! I've utterly forgotten all about it, mother. I am so sorry!"

"Forgotten it! when that was the very thing I sent you out for! What gross carelessness! And, pray, what have you been about then all this time? Go back to the station immediately and get one, before you take your hat off."

"Oh, no, mother, not now—not now!" cried Elizabeth. And then she came and knelt down by her mother's side, with that sudden craving for sympathy and help which, in spite of coldness and unkindness, is the instinctive attitude of a child towards its parent. "Mother, something very wonderful has happened—so wonderful that I can hardly understand it, or believe in it."

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

Mrs Bertram began to feel interested.

"I have just seen Sir James Ingram."

Then Mrs Bertram jumped up excitedly.

"Sir James here?" she cried. "Where is he? When did he come? Why, he will want dinner, Elizabeth, and we have nothing in the house but that cold mutton! Let us get out at once and get some chickens—the woman can roast a chicken pretty well—and some fish—a sole, I suppose; or I saw some nice mackerel at the shop this morning—I daresay they are not all gone."

Elizabeth drew her mother gently down again upon the sofa. The good lady was trembling with excitement.

"No, no, mother, don't excite yourself. You need not trouble about dinner: Sir James has gone."

"Gone? Gone away from here, do you mean?—back to London?"

"No; back to Hamerton, where he is staying."

"Gone without seeing me? Oh, it is impossible!—it is incredible! Elizabeth, you wretched child, what did you say or do to make him go like that, without seeing me?" and the widow hid her eyes in her pocket handkerchief, for tears of absolute misery and mortification were bursting from them.

"My dear mother," cried Elizabeth, almost laughing, for this extraordinary agitation was quite incomprehensible to her, "pray don't distress yourself! Sir James is coming down again on Tuesday, and to-day is Friday; and meanwhile I have so very much to think about, if you will only let me tell you."

Then Mrs Bertram removed her handkerchief from before her eyes, and looked at her daughter fixedly and steadfastly.

"What do you mean, Elizabeth?" she asked, in an odd, strained voice. Something awful, horrible, appalling, had just begun to glimmer into her mind. "Explain yourself, if you please."

Elizabeth had risen from her knees by this time. It had been a foolish, impetuous impulse which had made her fall upon them, and already she had seen its folly, and had repented of it. For Mrs Bertram was not the kind of mother who draws a daughter's troubled heart to her own, or soothes her weary head upon her breast. Elizabeth stood a little way off now, leaning back against the table and facing her mother, looking down upon her steadily, and a little curiously. It was the crisis of her own life, yet, oddly enough, her mother seemed to play a more important part in it than she did herself.

"Sir James is coming back on Tuesday for my answer," she said, very quietly. "He has given me till then to think it over, and to make up my mind—he has asked me to marry him."

Mrs Bertram's face was ashen white; she cast one glance up at Elizabeth—the glance was not a pleasant one—jealousy and hatred were mingled together in it. Elizabeth shivered a little, and looked away down at her own feet. A sense of disgust with herself, with her position, with life altogether, oppressed her. She felt as if she should choke.

"This is a very great surprise to me," said Mrs Bertram, after a few minutes.

"On the contrary," replied Elizabeth coldly, "it should be no surprise whatever, for Sir James tells me he spoke to you about me before we left home, and that you gave your consent."

"My consent for *you* to marry *my* old lover? What an extraordinary misconception!" And Mrs Bertram laughed harshly, and a little wildly.

And again Elizabeth felt a revulsion of her whole nature against the situation in which she found herself.

"*Are* you going to marry him?" inquired Mrs Bertram presently.

"I don't know. I have not made up my mind. There is no hurry. I need not decide until next Tuesday. I was merely asking your advice."

She said it as though the question at issue was the choice of a gown, or the selection of a new hat.

"Of course, if you like to marry a man who is older than your own father would have been if he were alive, you can do so."

"Of course," replied Elizabeth airily.

Then she took up her hat and gloves from the table behind her, and went upstairs to her own bedroom.

She stood there a long time leaning out of the window and staring at the blue and purple shadows on the sea.

"I don't think I will marry him after all," she said aloud to

herself. "It is horrible to think he once made love to mother, perhaps even may have done so lately. How awfully she looked at me!—as if she hated me!"

And then she stood a long time watching the sea, and the faint white sails far away, and the trail of smoke from an up-Channel steamer, lying low and heavy upon the breezeless air, like the shadow of an evil deed upon the purity of a stainless life.

But the sea and the skies gave her no help in her perplexity—there was nothing either in heaven or upon earth that seemed to hold out a hand to her in her trouble.

Down on the sands a little while ago she had stared at the sea, and the sea had said nothing back to her. All the time that Sir James had been talking to her she had hardly taken her eyes from the great blue sheet of waters, and from the little opalescent waves that broke themselves up with sighs and murmurs one after the other at her feet—but they had brought her no message nor counsel.

Only they seemed to moan over and over again, "Never more, never more!" as they died away in sad echoes along the shore.

And all the time Sir James had talked to her, telling her how dear she was to him—how much he would do for her—how happy he would make her.

"But I never thought of such a thing!" objected Elizabeth—"it never came into my head!"

"Of course not, my dear. I know that it never did. But you need not decide to-day—I do not want your answer yet. I had rather that you thought it over quietly."

"But I do not love you," said the poor child more than once, with a persistent honesty.

"No, perhaps not now! I do not expect you to love me all at once—I will be quite content with what you can give me—for you like me, do you not, Elizabeth?"

"Oh, yes—very, very much indeed!" she cried heartily; "you have always been so good and kind to me!"

"Then that will be enough for me. Liking is the basis of true happiness—love is very often a mere delusion. On my side, I think that you are almost perfection—charming and gentle, with the freshness of youth upon you—so unspoilt and yet so lovely. Ah! there is nothing like youth, as I always say—it is worth all the studied charms of maturer years."

Elizabeth did not at all object to being called lovely and charming. She was quite unaccustomed to such terms as applied to herself, and there was the zest of novelty about it.

Then Sir James told her that he had plenty of money, and

that nothing would make him so happy as to spend it upon her. His greatest pleasure would be to deck her up in fine clothes and beautiful jewels, and to gratify every whim of her heart.

For the old gentleman was man of the world enough to understand that these arguments are seldom utterly thrown away upon a young woman.

Nor were they in Elizabeth's case. She had never been dressed up in pretty frocks, and she owned but one gold locket and chain, and one pearl brooch, containing her father's hair, in the world. She was very far from being a worldly girl, but her eyes brightened when Sir James told her how lovely certain family diamonds would look glittering round her white neck, and shining amongst the coils of her brown hair. He drew a very pretty picture of her so decked out in these valuable trinkets, and Elizabeth could see herself quite plainly, and even supplemented the description in her own mind with the sort of gown that would be particularly becoming to her to wear with them.

But for all that, when she was upstairs staring again at the sea out of her little bedroom window, she told herself that she could not do it.

She had asked Sir James if they would live in London, and he had told her in London, in a house in Belgravia which belonged to him, or else in the country, if she preferred it: it should be just as she wished and liked best.

Then a guilty gladness came into her heart, and Marcus Cunningham's face flashed into her mind. If she lived in London, then he would see her some day, dressed up in her diamonds and her fine clothes, a great lady in her husband's house! Perhaps he would not despise her then,—would understand and regret the good thing he had thrown away as valueless!

Yet even this argument, when she was by herself in that mean little upper chamber, failed to convince her better nature that to do wrong would be right.

"How am I to marry one man whilst I love another?" she asked of herself, with a great weariness of heart. "I had far better live on at home, a forsaken and miserable old maid, and try to do my duty and bear my life with mother. After all, she has nobody but me, and she would miss me dreadfully if I were to go away, although she does not care very much for me."

By a tacit and mutual understanding, nothing more was said between the mother and child about Sir James' visit, nor about the momentous question which was to be decided on Tuesday. Saturday went by calmly and uneventfully, Mrs

Bertram again mentioned the time-table, and Elizabeth went to the station and got one ; but she was far too much absorbed by her own thoughts even to inquire if there was any special reason why her mother wanted it so much. In the afternoon they paced up and down the Esplanade together. Mrs Bertram was cheerful, made remarks upon the weather and the passers-by, and it even seemed to Elizabeth that she was anxious to propitiate her by being unusually agreeable and conversational ; she talked about going home again in a few days, and told her some anecdotes about a visit she and her father had paid to Folkestone in the first year of their married life. A great many people used to stand still and stare at her as she went by, Mrs Bertram said. She used to wear a remarkably becoming Leghorn straw hat trimmed with white ostrich plumes, she recollected, and her husband used to call her his "Gainsborough beauty" when she put it on.

Elizabeth listened dutifully ; it seemed to her as if her mother was trying to wipe out any unpleasant impression she might have experienced concerning the courtship of Sir James Ingram, by these frequent and persistent remarks about her father. She was vaguely grateful to her for doing so, and felt in some measure drawn nearer again to her mother than she had believed it possible to be after the scene of yesterday.

As she walked up and down, with Mrs Bertram leaning pretty heavily upon her arm, whilst she listened to her silly and conceited stories, she said to herself, "After all, it is very dull and dreary, but then it is my duty. I have nobody but mother, and she has nobody but me, and according to her rights she has certainly lived for me only since my father died ; she might, I daresay, have married again, but she has remained a widow, and presumably it is for my sake that she has done so. It is clearly my duty to stay with her, whilst it certainly is no part of my duty to marry Sir James Ingram."

By Sunday morning Elizabeth had definitely made up her mind to refuse that excellent and elderly baronet. When Tuesday should come she would meet him as he had requested her to do at the station, and would walk down again to the sands, and there at the same place and the same hour she would inform him that it was quite impossible to her to become Lady Ingram, or to wear his family diamonds, or become in any way a part and parcel of his goods and chattels.

She felt quite blythe and happy as she ran downstairs on Sunday morning, singing to herself as she opened the sitting-room door. Her mother was already down, and was reading a letter.

She looked up as Elizabeth entered.

"I have a letter from Dr Fairgrave ; he is coming down to Sandypport this morning, and will stop till to-morrow ; he says he will arrive at 11.45, so I think I won't go to church this morning, as he says he will come straight here from the station."

So that was why Mrs Bertram wanted to see the Sunday trains in the time-table !

Elizabeth understood now. She tossed her head a little defiantly. It was a damper certainly to her spirits to find that the Doctor would be quartered upon them for the whole day.

She went to church by herself, however, none the less contented with herself and her decision. She thanked God devoutly for preserving her from a great danger, and she prayed Him to help her to walk patiently along that narrow path of duty and dulness in which it seemed to her that it was right for her to remain.

When she came back from church, she found Dr Fairgrave seated on the sofa by her mother's side, whilst the maid-servant was laying out a luncheon of more than usual excellence upon the table.

Cold beef, cold salmon, hot chickens, and other dainties in the shape of tart and jelly were already displayed upon the white cloth ; whilst yet further delicacies were being added every instant to the spread.

A woman's eye is quick to notice these kind of details ; Elizabeth, glancing briefly at the preparations for the feast, knew at once that all these things must have been ordered yesterday. The inference was plain. Mrs Bertram must have known before the receipt of her morning's letter that Dr Fairgrave intended to come to Sandypport to-day.

Why on earth then had she not said so ? Elizabeth's open and honest nature revolted against the plotting and planning and concealing which characterised all her mother's dealings.

Why had she made a mystery of it ? What possible object could she have had for secrecy ? Dr Fairgrave leant back against the sofa cushions with a pleased expression upon his broad flabby face. He wore a white waistcoat, and his thumbs being tucked into the armholes thereof, a goodly expanse of starched shirt-front was displayed to view ; a florid tie of checked red and white silk was knotted loosely round his neck, and a heavy gold cable chain, freely ornamented with seals and locket, depended in a festoon across his ample person.

"Ah, my dear child !" he cried languidly, as Elizabeth came in, holding out a fat and ring-bedizened hand, but not otherwise altering his attitude at her entrance, "here you are, back from your devotions ! I hope you prayed for me, my dear, and

for all other wicked Sabbath-breakers who have not been to church?"

Elizabeth pretended not to see the outstretched hand.

"I did not even think about you, Dr Fairgrave," she answered coldly.

The Doctor laughed.

"Always an answer ready, Elizabeth! I never knew that little tongue silenced yet."

Elizabeth was too indignant to reply. Perhaps the Doctor thought gleefully that "the little tongue" was silenced this time, for he laughed again quite cheerily and gaily, and suggested, with an easy air of familiarity, that they should "fall to" upon the food, as he was as hungry as a hunter.

"Your fine sea air has given me an appetite already," he remarked, as he drew up his chair to the table and began uninvited to carve away at the beef.

"Beef, Elizabeth? or chicken?" he inquired, as though he were the host instead of the guest. Elizabeth felt a hot flame of anger and indignation flash up into her face. She glanced at her mother. Was it possible that Mrs Bertram could be unconscious of the impertinence of this familiarity? What business had this man to make himself at home at their table?

But apparently her mother did not see things in the same light that she did. Mrs Bertram was smiling sweetly and amiably. She had apparently taken some extra pains with her toilet whilst Elizabeth was out. She wore a pretty cream-coloured summer dress trimmed with pale lilac ribbons; her hair was piled up in a fashionable knot on the top of her head; there was a little pink flush on her cheeks; she seemed quite eager and animated. Elizabeth thought she had never seen her look so girl-like and pretty—she wondered vaguely what it was that had changed her so.

"And what will you have yourself, dear Doctor?" she was saying to her guest. "Will you not help yourself first, as you are so hungry? Elizabeth and I can wait upon ourselves."

And this the Doctor without further ceremony proceeded to do.

All through lunch Mrs Bertram chatted gaily, glancing coquettishly and merrily across the table. There were all sorts of allusions and jokes between the two which to Elizabeth were utterly incomprehensible, and indeed absolutely bewildering. Mrs Bertram had always made a ridiculous fuss over Dr Fairgrave, but middle-aged ladies are often devoted to their medical man, and Elizabeth knew that her mother had great faith in his talent, and derived much benefit from his ministrations.

She was quite accustomed to the little flatteries and speeches which it was their habit to make to each other ; but there was something to-day in her mother's attitude and behaviour towards this odious individual that went far beyond all this, and that was quite out of the common order of things.

Elizabeth began to feel startled and uncomfortable. As the dreadful meal went on she became more and more gloomy and abstracted, and as soon as she possibly could she made her escape from the table, and got away out of the house unobserved, and went for a walk by herself along the cliff. Something altogether too dreadful for words was beginning to force itself upon her mind, in spite of her utmost efforts to keep the horrible notion at bay. She tried to laugh at herself ; she told herself that her mother had always been fond of a silly flirtation, and that for want of something more amusing, no doubt, could not help flirting even with her doctor ! It was bad taste, no doubt, and rather lowering to her own dignity, but that was all. She said this over and over again to herself, speaking the words aloud even, so as to give them a greater emphasis, and get rid of that horrible haunting fancy that would keep on coming back to her.

She had brought out a book with her, and by-and-by she sat down in a stubble-field, under the shelter of a stook of corn, and began to read it. It was a queer old-fashioned book of memoirs of the reign of George the Third that she had stumbled upon, having taken it up at random from the same bookshelf where she had found the *Spectator*. The title of it was "Memoirs of a Lady of Quality." Beginning to read in an idle, desultory manner, Elizabeth soon became interested and even engrossed. The quaint language, the strange accounts of manners and customs, the troubles which the heroine seemed to undergo by reason of the attentions of a perfect multitude of clamorous lovers, all amused her and diverted her thoughts, until by degrees she forgot Dr Fairgrave, and the nightmare which his presence had caused her.

The sun was setting before it occurred to her to shut up her book and saunter homewards. A golden glory was upon the land and sea as she strolled slowly towards home along the narrow white pathway upon the edge of the cliff. Elizabeth felt soothed and quieted by the peace and the stillness of it all.

"After all, he will be gone to-morrow," she said to herself, in a calmer frame of mind ; "it is only one day of discomfort, and by Sunday next we shall be at home again."

Then she sighed a little to herself, as she thought about the

Just then she lifted her eyes, and beheld a couple coming towards her across the cornfields. A couple of lovers evidently, for they were arm-in-arm, and the woman leant tenderly against the man, glancing up into his face at every minute, with loving earnestness. Tradespeople from the little town, thought Elizabeth, or Mary Ann, enjoying her Sunday outing with her "young man."

Then all at once they drew nearer, and she caught sight of fluttering cream-coloured skirts, and of lilac ribbons trembling in the breeze.

The horrible truth became revealed to her. It was her own mother and Dr Fairgrave!

Stern and cold and hard she walked on steadily to meet them. There must have been something very dreadful in the judgment of her young face, for when they got near enough to see it, Mrs Bertram hastily removed her arm, and crimsoned guiltily up to the roots of her hair.

"You must tell her, Gabriel!" she whispered to him, looking frightened and ashamed.

Then Dr Fairgrave planted himself boldly across the pathway, and stood there like a Colossus of Rhodes, with one large foot stretched out on either side.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of, my dear. Elizabeth, my love, your dearest mamma has consented to make me the happiest of men. Come here and kiss your new papa!"

But Elizabeth only put her hands up to her ears, and with a low cry of horror and dismay fled past them across the stubble field towards the little town, neither looking to the right nor to the left until she reached the shelter of their own particular green-shuttered little lodging-house.

CHAPTER XVI.

FOUND WANTING.

WHEN Rachel found herself alone with Vere Sherwood, she was for a few moments so utterly confused that she could scarcely summon the courage to look at him.

His calm voice and commonplace manner, however, soon helped her to regain her composure.

"You must forgive me, Miss Brabberstone, for detaining you in this summary fashion. But I saw you in the concert-room, and it is such a long time since I have heard anything of you, that I could not help wishing to ask you how you are."

There was nothing in this speech to lead her to suppose that he was about to touch upon any subject of an agitating nature. His calmness acted beneficially upon her, and she answered him quietly, and in her usual voice.

"I am very well. I did not think," with a faint smile, "that you saw me."

"I always see everybody I know when I am singing. Are you in town for long?"

"No, only for a few days; we are going to Scotland on Monday night." Then after a little pause, in which there entered some element of awkwardness, she added, lifting her eyes for the first time shyly to his,—*"And you? are you well? I need not ask if you are getting on. I hear of you everywhere. Are you satisfied with your success?"*

"Thanks," he answered slowly; and then he bent his eyes upon her so earnestly and so fixedly that her own fell beneath them. "But is it possible that you take any interest in me still?" he added, a little sarcastically.

"How can you doubt it!" she murmured reproachfully.

"I beg your pardon," he said, very gravely. "Well, yes, then, I suppose I may fairly say that I have got on; but of course one has never done enough, or worked hard enough, to feel satisfied with oneself, when the object to be attained is so great and so far above one's reach."

"And you still like the life?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Like it? Of course I do! My whole soul is wrapped up in it."

Then for a moment she did not speak. Her heart was beating strangely, her colour came and went. She knew that he had not forgotten that scene in the shadowy garden,—that a whole year had not sufficed to wipe out the memory of her cruel words, nor to soften the blow which her own folly had dealt him. And yet by some subtle influence she felt that he had not ceased to love her.

Rachel Brabberstone was a proud woman, but she was also an impulsive one. She had tried to forget this man, with his, to her ideas, inferior position, and his strange uncongenial existence and aims, and, to a certain extent, she had succeeded not only in forgetting him, but in thinking a good deal about another man; but for all her efforts and for all her success, the very moment she was with him again she knew that he was her soul's master, and that the feeling she had for him was one which no other man would ever be capable of arousing in her.

In absence, she had told herself that she had wiped him out

in her innermost heart for ever. All her reason and all her common sense, ay, and all her worldly and selfish instincts as well, had waged an incessant warfare for months against what she told herself perpetually was nothing but the infatuation of absolute madness.

Yet at this moment the madness was uppermost, and a thought that had been often in her mind of late rushed suddenly in words from her lips.

"You have heard," she said, almost breathlessly, "that we have all been electioneering? and my father has been working very hard? and now we have a Conservative majority, and my father is to have an appointment under the new Government. I don't know yet what it is to be, but he will get something for certain."

"Yes; I am very glad, if it gives you pleasure."

Vere Sherwood was but faintly interested in Lord Brabberstone's promotion.

"No; but don't you see what I mean? I wanted to tell you that he will have powerful interest; that he will have places to give away, clerkships and secretaryships and that sort of thing—very good appointments some of them; and if—if—I were to ask him, if he were to know that—there was any one whom his daughter took a great interest in, I know he would make an effort to get something really worth having—and—and—if you— Oh, do you not understand?"

For a moment he looked at her fixedly and oddly without a word; then he said, very quietly,—

"And am *I* the person you take a great interest in, and for whom you will ask your father to get one of these good clerkships or secretaryships? Is that what you mean—Rachel?" speaking her name, after a little pause, with a soft tenderness.

But Rachel knew that she had spoken in vain! She sank down into a chair by the table and buried her face in her hands.

Vere Sherwood's face, if only she could have seen it, was a wonderful sight. It was all broken up with a great pity and a great tenderness. He loved her so well, and yet she understood him so little! and he was so sorry for her, appreciating perfectly what a stupendous effort it must have been to her to say this much to him, and how bad it would be for her pride to bear that which he must say to her in answer.

"My child," he said, very gently, "and do you really think that even to win *you* I could do so mean and base a thing as to give up a profession I am proud of, to which I believe myself capable of doing credit, in order to sink into some routine work

of luxurious idleness that would be a degradation to me? No, Rachel; you cannot believe this of me! If you are good enough to take an interest in me, which your kind words seem to imply, then you would only end by despising me, were I to stoop to dishonour at your bidding."

She lifted her eyes and looked at him. There was something in this man that was greater and stronger than other men,—something that made him not only master of others, but, what was finer still, master of himself. He was like some rock of granite, against which lesser natures might cast themselves in vain, but which could never be bent or swayed from its own purpose. She could not take her eyes from his—they fascinated her.

Then he said to her once more:—

"You must never say this kind of thing to me again—it is unworthy of you to tempt me. But, my love, if you love me truly, why do you not come to me as I am, and share my life, with all its toil as well as its success? Ah! you cannot do that?" and the passion of his voice died away suddenly into chill disappointment.

For Rachel's head had sunk once more into her hands.

No, she could not do it,—could not face the anger, the obloquy, the scorn of the world to which she belonged,—could not bear the downfall of her own ambitions, or risk the neglect of the friends who would too certainly ignore and despise her by reason of her folly.

"My father would never consent," she murmured weakly, for she felt herself incapable of any heroism for love's sake.

For a moment he was silent, looking at her pityingly, and a little scornfully too, as she sat before him, turning her face away in her shame and misery.

"Rachel," he said at last, very seriously, "I shall never, after to-day, ask you this question again; but for the last time I say to you what I will not repeat again. Since you love me, is not your love strong enough to make you disregard all those trammels of your birth and position, of your father's opposition and the displeasure of your friends? Can you not break down all these false barriers of an artificial society, and brave all, and come to me for love's sake alone?"

"Ah," she cried wildly, "it is you who do not love me truly! If you did, you would give up all for me; you would drop this occupation which separates us from one another like a wall; you would understand that you must rise to my position, not drag me down to your level. Give up your music, and I will be your wife."

"Never! Never! So long as I am alive, I will never give up a profession I am proud of, and which is the very breath of my being, or bury ignobly in a napkin the gift which God has given me to use. Nor will I sink to ignominy to win the love of any woman upon earth."

He stood facing her with blazing anger and indignation in his eyes; he loved her dearly, yet he almost hated her for tempting him. She knew that she could not move him, and, oddly enough, although her love was not strong enough to be in sympathy with him, yet her heart beat with pride at his stubbornness and his steadfastness. It was that strength of his nature which compelled her to love him still, against all the claims of her reason and her common-sense.

"Rachel," he said again, after a few moments of a terrible silence, and this time his voice was kind and tender, "I see that no good can come of these discussions between us,—that we can never agree, or be at one, about this thing. You cannot brave all for me, and I cannot lower myself, or alter my whole life, even to win so dear a prize as your sweet self. All must be over between us for ever—it is your own wish, your own decision, is it not?"

She hid her face again in her hands, shudderingly, and a few hot tears welled up blindingly into her eyes; she could not answer him.

"I will never ask you to be my wife again. But remember always that I love you, and that I do not love lightly, nor change easily,—that I shall no doubt love you always to the very end of my life. Some of the hard thoughts, and most of the actual contempt, with which I thought of you a year ago, have softened and died away."

"Oh, Vere!"

"I have learnt to make allowances for what you said to me, and to enter in some measure into your difficulties and objections. You are not at all the woman I thought I had found in you, but for all that you are the woman whom I love—whom I fear, for my own peace of mind, I shall always love. Some day, Rachel, perhaps you may find yourself equal to the sacrifice I have required of you. When that day comes, write to me—send to me; wherever I may be—whatever I may be doing, I will come to you—for then, and then only, I shall know that your love will ennoble my life, and that it will be well for us to meet again."

Then she sprang suddenly to her feet, and laid her hands clingly upon his arm; her eyes were wet with tears, her face flushed into a rare and strange beauty, her lips no longer

proud and cold, but trembling with a soft and passionate ardour.

"Vere," she said, "do not let us part. Why do you ask what is impossible? Why will you not see with my eyes, and think with my thoughts? What will be the good of pride, or of ambition, or of anything on the face of the whole earth, if you are without love. And do you not see that I love you, Vere?"

Surely never man was so sorely tempted—so hard beset by the sweetness of a great and passionate longing for that which he had but to reach out his hand to take and to grasp as his own for ever! The touch of her clinging hands, the pleading gaze in her love-lit eyes, the trembling earnestness of her eager words, all affected him powerfully and almost irresistibly. There were a few brief seconds during which he had well-nigh yielded to her, when he had nearly said in his heart that she was right, and that life could hold no good thing without her—for one moment he hesitated and quailed, bowing his head so that the anguish upon his face should be hidden from her eyes, whilst a strong emotion shook his whole bodily frame, as the storms of heaven will sometimes shake the hardy young oak trees, which they are powerless to break.

It was only for a moment. When he raised his eyes once more to hers they were very calm and steady, and a trifle stern and cold—her hands dropped nervelessly from his arm, she saw that she had pleaded in vain, and that her cause was lost.

"You must come to me to prove your love, Rachel."

"Is there no other way?" she murmured, a little brokenly and faintly.

"There is no other way." Then he pressed her hand briefly, dropping it again quickly, and opened the door of the little room for her. "Good-bye—God bless you for ever," he whispered, as she passed out with a bent head and a stricken and blanched face of utter woe.

So the battle had been fought out between them, and seemingly for the last time—it was not likely that the subject could ever be renewed. The man who was too brave to surrender to the love that was clogged with unworthy conditions, and the woman whose pride of birth and dread of the world's verdict held her back with iron hands from happiness and love, parted at the last without a word, without even a farewell look.

Rachel went out into the now empty entrance of the hall; her servant was waiting outside with a cab. She got into it mechanically, and drove home like one half-dazed and numbed with some great and horrible blow.

"It is all over," she said to herself. "I have humbled myself

to the very earth, and it has been all in vain ; there is nothing more for me to do but to forget him."

Perhaps she was right, for at the same moment Vere Sherwood was striding homewards with a roll of music under his arm, and something of the strange triumph of that hard-won battle still in the fire of his glowing eyes, and in the lines about his stern and determined lips.

"I shall never ask her to be my wife again," he said to himself ; "it was the last time—and she has been found wanting. Perhaps," he added, after a while, with a half-sigh as much of relief as of regret—"perhaps it is best as it is."

For Vere Sherwood was not one of those men—there are indeed but very few of them—to whom a disappointment in matters of the heart brings the absolute overthrow and collapse of existence. Vere would never die of a broken heart, nor lay down his hands in despair by reason of a hopeless love.

Sometimes, indeed, during the days that followed, there came before his eyes a picture of Rachel's beautiful face, all softened and tender with her pleading, and her words of love rang with a bitter sweetness in his ears. But he thrust away the thought of her firmly and sternly : he would not allow such visions to linger in his memory. He worked very hard—harder than ever, putting his whole life and soul into what he had to do, and finding that real happiness in it which Art alone, of all the professions on earth, has the power to bring with it, and which is as different to the sordid money-making of every other occupation of life as a divine poem is to the quotations of the money market. Yet to the end of time the man who has an artistic soul will be misunderstood and despised by his fellow-men, whilst the one and only earthly thing which has so great a power that it can conquer even love itself in the human heart, will be maligned and slandered and reckoned as a thing of naught.

Henceforth in Vere Sherwood's life there was no longer any place at all for the love of woman.

CHAPTER XVII.

CORRIEHALLIE LODGE, N.B.

SIR FREDERICK CUNNINGHAM was walking arm-in-arm with his son up and down the terrace walk in front of Lord Brabberstone's Scotch house, on the east-coast of Ross-shire, one fine Sunday morning in August.

All the ladies, and several of the men of the party, and a good contingent of the servants, had betaken themselves, in two waggonette loads, to service in a kirk some six miles away, and the Cunninghams, father and son, had the place pretty well to themselves.

Corriehallie Lodge stood high up on the slope of the mountain, in the hollow of a deep narrow gorge, which sheltered it securely from those tempestuous winds that often sweep the northern coasts with so merciless a rigour. It stood about two miles inland, and commanded a fine view of the distant sea, as well as of a charming wood-bordered sea-loch which ran some miles inland, and wound in a graceful curve around the lower slopes of the Corriehallie grounds. The house was a comfortable, medium-sized white stone building, without any pretensions either to magnificence or even to luxury in its outside or inside arrangements; it was just a somewhat small but not incommensurable shooting-lodge, capable of accommodating a small party for the grouse season—nothing more. On this particular morning, the distant sea was a sheet of azure, the loch below lay lapped in mirror-like beauty, and all the heather-tinted mountain sides melted away in purple and gold into the delicious haze of the morning sunshine.

Sir Frederick had arrived late on the previous evening, and not having seen his son since his election for East Silshire, he had naturally a great deal to say to him. Let it not be imagined that Sir Frederick had come all the way to Scotland in August with any ulterior views respecting the grouse; indeed it is doubtful whether on his northward journey he had paid that prince of game birds the compliment of recollecting his existence at all: sport of all kinds was looked upon by him as a very trivial and secondary subject indeed. He regarded shooting, fishing, hunting, and all other pastimes of that nature, as wholesome relaxations for the young and healthy, but did not for a moment consider that they afford a serious occupation to sober-minded men. He knew that Marcus did all that kind of thing—that was all very well—Marcus was young, and it was desirable that he should go about amongst his fellow-men and take part in all that others did, but Sir Frederick would not have conceived his son's presence at Corriehallie to be sufficiently accounted for by a mere love of shooting, had not other and more important objects rendered it desirable that he should be there. Literature and politics were the sole and only occupations of this old man's mind, and ambition and the greed for success the only passions of his soul. He had done his best to render his only son an exact counterpart of himself.

He was a tall old man with a fine intellectual brow, and searching dark eyes, that contrasted picturesquely with his white hair and beard; he carried himself uprightly, and his manner was authoritative and commanding. But for the defect in his speech, which was not so much a stammer as a distinct impediment, owing to a faulty conformation in the roof of his mouth, Sir Frederick would without a doubt have been in the foremost rank of public life. This alone had barred the way to his becoming an orator, and to that success in a political career which he coveted so ardently for his son. Failing that, his rare powers had been diverted into the more tranquil paths of literary research.

There was something very interesting in the spectacle of these two men, both highly gifted, and both held together in the strong bond of union, which unanimity of purpose creates in persons to whom this world's success is the ruling passion of the brain.

Of the two, the old man was the master mind. Marcus had weak points in his armour; he was amenable to the softer influences of life; he was a little vacillating in purpose, and, moreover, his ambition had not yet been able entirely to silence the promptings of his heart.

To Sir Frederick Cunningham love was as trivial and unworthy a motive as pleasure—indeed the two counted for very much the same thing in his mind. He had never really loved anybody but himself. His marriage had been one of expediency, and his temperate affection towards his early deceased wife had been founded upon a very proper sense of gratitude for the fortune which she had brought to him.

His very love for his son, which counted so much in his favour amongst his intimate friends, was not, in truth, love at all, but simply the exultation of gratified pride; for he was excessively proud of Marcus, and every forward step which his son took along the path of life, added fuel to his self-glorification, and ministered to his own ever-growing ambitions. To Marcus he was undoubtedly an affectionate and devoted father, but to a son less gifted, and doomed to failure, he would certainly have shown nothing but a cold and relentless aversion.

To-day, for the first time, Sir Frederick Cunningham approached his son upon a topic which had hitherto had but little place in his counsels. As the two walked arm-in-arm in the sunshine slowly up and down the garden, he spoke to him about marriage.

“The time has come for you, my dear boy, to marry,” he had said to him very gravely. His physical difficulty in speaking

at all, always made Sir Frederick very slow in his utterances; he brought out his words with great deliberation, and with long pauses often between each word, which added a strange and almost a painful solemnity to everything he said.

Marcus's quick and ready answers appeared to be somewhat emotional in their character, simply by reason of the contrast they afforded to his father's method of speaking.

"To marry? Why now? Surely there is plenty of time?"

"There is always plenty of time, Marcus, if men only understand how to use it; but the richest abundance is more usually squandered than turned to advantage."

"Then will not it be as well to postpone matrimony for the next ten years or so?" said Marcus laughingly; "there can be no possible hurry."

"On the contrary, there is no point of your career when a judicious marriage could more effectually consolidate your position than the present."

"Marriage is a very wide subject," began Marcus vaguely.

"I said a *judicious* marriage," remarked his father, looking at him fixedly and meaningly.

Then, of course, Marcus understood at once that Sir Frederick was alluding to Rachel Brabberstone. He coloured a little and turned his head slightly away.

"You do not suppose that I have come from Sussex to Ross-shire for no purpose, my dear Marcus?"

"Oh, I had not thought about it much; it is a fine air up here, and you have been working very hard of late, dear sir; you sorely needed rest and change."

Marcus spoke airily, and somewhat nervously. He wanted to gain a little time before he committed himself to an opinion.

"Rest and change are good things in their way," replied the old man seriously; "but it was not for such secondary causes that I am here. I have come, Marcus, in order to bring about your engagement to Miss Brabberstone. Tell me how do things stand at present between you and her?"

"My dear father, have you not always impressed upon me the importance of not making love in earnest to any woman, more especially to a marriageable one? Why should I have made an exception in Miss Brabberstone's favour?"

"Because she is, of all women upon earth, the most desirable for you to marry."

Marcus stood still, looking down thoughtfully, and prodding the gravel in front of his feet with his walking-stick. Sir Frederick laid a hand on each of his arms.

it on the very highest authority that Brabberstone is certainly to be Foreign Secretary : his interest will be invaluable to you. As his son-in-law elect, you might certainly reckon upon getting a Junior Lordship of the Treasury within a very short time. You would be raised at the outset of your career from an insignificant county member to a position in which you would have a right to a hearing in the House. You will in this way get your chance, your opportunity—that is all you want. You have the talent, and your natural gift of oratory has been already trained and cultured to the highest degree. Given an opening, and your rise will be swift as well as certain ; all that you require is the impetus of a helping hand at starting, and the strength of family influence at your back.”

“Cannot Lord Brabberstone do all that for me without my marrying his daughter ?” demurred Marcus.

“No. Because Lord Brabberstone’s daughter has beauty, wit, and money, and that she will be a material help to you in your upward struggle.”

Marcus knew this quite as well as his father did. He was unable to offer any objection. He knew that Rachel was a desirable match for him, but he had all a manly Englishman’s dislike of dictation upon such a personal topic ; and there was something else too, surely something else, deep down in the unacknowledged thoughts of his innermost soul ! To do him justice, he thought about Elizabeth.

He was sure now that Elizabeth could not be going to marry Guy Brabberstone, in spite of his mother’s communication. Either the thing was broken off, or it had never existed, save in her own imagination, for Guy was at Corriehallie now, and nothing had been said about his engagement, nor had Miss Bertram’s name been mentioned in his hearing by any one of the family. Marcus had turned this over in his mind a good deal during the week he had been in Ross-shire. But he was not a man to take action rashly upon any subject, and he had hitherto contented himself with drawing his own deductions from what he had noticed. Perhaps he told himself that there was plenty of time to think about Elizabeth, and no great occasion to make up his mind as to what he should do about her, in a hurry.

If he had done her an injustice, he was sorry for it ; at the same time, the resentment in his mind towards her in that she had at all events encouraged the attentions of Guy Brabberstone, had not altogether abated, and he had a decided feeling that, things being as they were, and he having escaped from his imprudence so very easily, and with so little personal in-

convenience to himself, it would no doubt be as well if he let well alone, and refrained from placing himself anew in an untenable position.

All the same, the repugnance which he felt about asking Rachel Brabberstone to marry him, was so great that he spoke of it in the plainest terms to his father.

"I know all the advantages perfectly—you cannot impress them upon me more strongly than I do myself—but it is Miss Brabberstone herself—"

"Miss Brabberstone? How can you possibly object to her?" cried his father in surprise. "Is she not a handsome, clever, and accomplished woman?—a wife of whom any man might reasonably be proud?"

"She is all that," admitted Marcus. "And yet—and yet—for me she has no special attraction. I have not for her that feeling with which a man should approach the woman with whom he desires to spend his life. Rachel Brabberstone inspires me neither with tenderness nor with passion."

"And will you tell me, Marcus, that you are to be the slave of passion?" replied his father, with deep indignation,—“that for such paltry and ignoble reasons you are ready to sacrifice your whole future career?"

Sir Frederick had a way of putting things, which could make right appear to be wrong, and wrong seem to be disguised in the attributes of high and noble virtue. He was almost magnificent at these moments, and was able, by sheer force of his will, to impress his hearers with a sense of their own moral inferiority.

Marcus felt—as he had felt hundreds of times before when arguing a subject with his father—thoroughly and absolutely ashamed of himself. He became instantly convinced that Sir Frederick was right, and that his own motives were indeed unworthy and contemptible.

"I trust, sir," he hastened to reply, "that ignoble reasons may never influence my conduct. I think—nay I feel sure, that you misunderstand me—"

"Then you consent to my proposition?"

"Give me at least time to consider it,—a week, at all events—"

Sir Frederick smiled.

"Oh, yes, my boy, a week, by all means, three, if you like! Am I a tyrant, Marcus? All that I ask is that you should put things in their right aspect to yourself. I can then—in this, as in all other matters—safely trust to your own good feeling and to your instincts of true wisdom to guide you,

and I have never found you wanting in either as yet, my son—”

He was very clever, this old diplomat, with his slow speech and his rounded phrases; and he knew his son so well!—understood so perfectly how first to turn his head in the right direction, and then with delicate insinuations and carefully-veiled flattery, just to give him the right amount of impetus which his weaker nature required, in order to send him of his own accord as it were, along the road he wished him to traverse.

When the conversation came to an end, Marcus was left with the firm impression that he had reserved the rights of decision and free-will entirely in his own hands, whereas Sir Frederick knew that the end to be obtained was absolutely a foregone conclusion.

By-and-by the waggonettes came home from kirk, and the whole party found themselves assembled around the luncheon-table. Besides the Brabberstones and the Cunninghams, there were staying at Corriehallie Lodge a Mr and Mrs Fletcher, Colonel Dynevor, and Lady Arthur Millbanke.

Mr Fletcher may be described in half-a-dozen words; he was a commonplace individual, dull in conversation and retiring in manner, and his great claim upon society lay solely and entirely in the fact that he was a most admirable shot. His wife was a graceful-looking but somewhat over-dressed American lady, whose vast variety and unceasing elaboration of costumes were the despair and envy of her fellow-women. Whatever you wore, Mrs Fletcher was certain to be wearing something better; and however perfect a lady might justly consider her outfit to be, she might be perfectly certain, if Mrs Fletcher were staying in the same house, that she would instantly be snuffed out and extinguished into hopeless inferiority by her. Colonel Dynevor was a sportsman and a gentleman; he had been in the Guards, and was a man of the world; he was an admirer, although a most unaspiring one, of Rachel Brabberstone, and he did not flatter himself for a moment that she would ever return his feelings, or even become aware of the meaning of his attentions. Lady Brabberstone liked to have him in the house, because he was a useful decoy to lead on other men; she had invited him on this occasion purposely to stimulate Marcus Cunningham's somewhat dilatory courtship.

As to Lady Arthur Millbanke, it is not possible to dismiss her with such summary brevity. There is a great deal to be said about Lady Arthur, so much, indeed, that although she is destined to play a somewhat important part in these pages, it

would require a great deal more space than I can give to her, and a far more fluent pen than mine, in order to describe with accuracy her many charms and talents.

Lady Arthur Millbanke was a woman about whose age there existed a profound and delightful uncertainty. To young people who had known her but a few years she appeared to be about thirty; but to those who were able to reckon up with certainty the length of time she had been before the public, she must of a surety have been on the wrong side of forty. She had been once a woman of great beauty, and she still retained a truly marvellous juvenility of appearance. To grow old appeared impossible to her. Her figure was as slight, her eye as bright, her manner as coquettish and as lively, as a girl of eighteen. Her spring of youth and spirit, in short, appeared to be absolutely inexhaustible, and she took as keen and unfeigned an interest in the pleasures and excitement of life as she did five-and-twenty years ago. Of course there were not wanting women to sneer at her vivacity, and cast doubts upon the genuineness of her attractions; but if she "made up" her face, she did it so cleverly that her devices were almost impalpable; and if her red gold locks were doctored, they were treated in so masterly a fashion as absolutely to defy detection. Lady Arthur was too successful a woman to risk humiliation, under any shape or form; she never aped the *ingénue*, because she knew she would be unable to sustain the character; neither did she declare herself to be seven-and-twenty, because she was well aware that she would only make a laughing-stock of herself were she to do so. All she had ever been heard to say concerning her age was, that, of course, she was an old, a very very old woman, "but as long as I feel young, and can enjoy life, what does that matter, my dear?" To this day men run after her, fall in love with her desperately, and believe in her as a queen amongst women, without a thought that to some of them she might easily have been a mother, and that had Providence blessed her with a daughter in the first year of her marriage, she could, with perfect facility, have been a grandmother.

Lady Arthur's domestic position was as felicitous as her social surroundings. She was not a widow, because Lord Arthur Millbanke was alive, and, in proof of his existence, his cards were left with due regularity upon her friends, in company with her own; but she was quite unhampered by any conjugal restrictions concerning him, because he was very old, and had long ceased to go into any society at all, or to receive visitors in his own house. He was not at all an invalid, but he was feeble, and liked to be left in peace. It was many

years since anybody save his own family had seen him ; Lady Arthur spoke of him frequently, mentioning him incidentally as " My poor dear," and quoting his opinions and ideas with a freedom which suggested that she found him a useful cloak for her own purposes. In fact, she enjoyed all the shelter of a husband's name, and at the same time all the freedom and independence of a widow. In addition, in spite of her position, and in spite of her popularity with men ; in spite, too, of a certain audacity of manner and of conduct, no breath of slander had ever tarnished the whiteness of her good name, nor had any libellous tongue been able to cast a slur upon her reputation.

Lady Arthur was a woman of the world, from the crown of her golden head down to the tips of her little pointed slippers. There was not a hole or corner in all London life that was hidden from her knowledge, not a situation, however complicated and critical, out of which she did not know how to extricate herself and her friends with safety and with honour. She was full of an untiring energy, and of a bright activity, which helped to keep her young, and to send the blood coursing through her veins with all the vigour and warmth of her early youth. She was blessed by nature with a splendid constitution, with which she had never played any tricks, and she had an appetite which was a wonder and a marvel to all who beheld her at table. Whenever there was nothing to sit up for, Lady Arthur went to bed at nine o'clock ; but she was always up with the lark, as fresh and blooming as a daisy ; out of doors before breakfast, if she was in the country, or tending her plants and her birds if in town. No doubt she owed her wonderfully young looks to these regular and healthy habits, to which she had adhered all her life with a praiseworthy persistence. " You cannot burn the candle at both ends," she would say to her women friends ; " if you sit up till two o'clock on Monday, you must go to bed at nine on Tuesday, but no good to health or complexion ever came of lying abed in the morning."

For the rest, she was a charming woman, intelligent in mind, and clever in conversation, and so indefatigable in her ready vivacity that no party which included her could sink into dullness, and no room into which she entered fail to be the better for the brightness of her society. Lady Arthur at the Corriehallie luncheon-table was soon as busy discussing the minister's sermon as the cold grouse upon her plate.

" He told us we were to shave our heads, Sir Frederick ; you ought to have been there to hear."

" Shave our heads, Lady Arthur ?"

" Yes, it's a positive fact. He said all human vanity arises

in the first place from the combing and dressing of hair ; if our heads were bald, then our hearts would be pure. He quoted the African savages and Mother Eve ; Absolom, who came to grief by his hair, and all the ladies in St Paul's epistles, who wore braids. He told us that it's all a matter of hair that we are sinful. I am really not sure that there is not something in it. I'd like to try if I could grow a better woman by shaving mine. Will you cut off yours, Sir Frederick—beard and all—if I cut mine ? ”

But further discussion upon this exciting topic was here brought to an untimely end by the arrival of the post-bag, which was brought in with a due solemnity, and handed to Lord Brabberstone at the foot of the table, who proceeded to unlock it with the key upon his watch chain.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LETTER-BAG.

SCOTCH posts have a habit of arriving at abnormal hours ; they come and they go no one knows why nor wherefore, at times and seasons when they are least expected, and when their appearance is an injudicious interruption, and their departure a serious inconvenience. There is no dependence to be placed upon them, nor is there any regularity in their movements : whilst very frequently it happens that if they are particularly wanted and anxiously expected, they do not appear at all.

As to the Corriehallie post, on all week days, if it came at all, it entered with the fish course at dinner, and on Sundays, the bag being specially fetched by a groom from a village shop ten miles off, had an unpleasant fashion of turning up in the middle of lunch, and so utterly destroying the comfort and sociability of the mid-day meal.

No sooner did the post-bag appear than an utter silence fell upon Lord Brabberstone's guests. Every eye was fixed upon the master of the house, as with somewhat blundering fingers he fitted the small gilt key into the lock, unfastened a couple of straps, and plunged his hand into the bag. The butler stood by with a silver salver, and no sooner were the letters laid in a heap upon it, than he retired to the sideboard and proceeded to sort them in little separate packets, before handing the tray round the table. This operation took time, partly because Higgins was somewhat slow and deliberate in his movements,

and partly also because he was much interested in examining the aspect and superscription of each individual letter ; moreover, to him also fell the duty of dividing the sheep from the goats, that is, the letters for the gentry from the letters for the servants, and as the under-footman stood by him with a smaller tray for the receipt of the latter, it took all Higgins' dignity to restrain the impatience of his inferior, and to award to him his portion of the spoils with a due regard to the importance of the occasion, and the maintenance of his own position of high trust and responsibility.

Meanwhile, the expectant persons around the table possessed their souls in such patience as they were capable of, and in a tension of nerves which resulted in something akin to exasperation. Conversation naturally languished during these moments of suspense ; and although everybody tried to preserve their manners and their politeness, by futile efforts to appear unconcerned, it was plain that nobody had any thoughts at all but for the rustling and sorting that was going on at the end of the room, upon the sideboard.

Colonel Dynevor indeed—rushing into the breach as becomes a soldier—made a gallant effort to continue the head-shaving question, by remarking that he was very bald already, but that he had felt no appreciable improvement in his moral condition in consequence of the falling off of his locks. But nobody was ready with a repartee, and so this observation fell very flat indeed, being received by nothing more than a sickly smile from Mrs Fletcher, whilst Lady Arthur actually said quite audibly, “Do hush !”

Then Rachel came to the rescue with a question concerning Sir Frederick's journey the previous day, and Mr Fletcher said, amidst a profound silence,—

“Will you kindly pass me the mustard.”

Then the letters came round, and everybody fell upon their own, and at a polite intimation from Lady Brabberstone, nothing more was seen or heard than the rending of envelopes and the rustling of notepaper.

Soon a small under-current of remarks and observations arose, like the murmur of little rivulets, upon every side. Nobody listened to his neighbour, and yet everybody give vent to little self-communings and half-confidences sufficiently uninteresting to everybody else.

“Nothing but bills again !”

“My uncle threatens to cut me out of his will if I'm not at Bournemouth by Sunday—that's to-day !”

“Aunt Mary's old poodle dead at last ! What a comfort !”

"Three invitations for last week, and such yards and yards from my poor dear! I never can get through it all!"

This last from Lady Arthur, with a profound sigh. But nobody paid any more attention to her than they did to anybody else.

Suddenly Lady Brabberstone uttered an exclamation so loud and so piercing that everybody did at last look up in startled surprise.

"Great heavens! the world must be coming to an end!"

Lady Brabberstone was pale and trembling, turning over two letters with agitation, and looking from one to the other with evident amazement and consternation.

"What is the matter?" cried everybody breathlessly.

"The most extraordinary piece of news I ever heard in my life—I can scarcely believe it,—hardly believe the evidence of my senses! *Who* do you think is going to be married—and to *whom*?"

"Pray tell us, my love," here said Lord Brabberstone from the other end of the table; "let us know the worst, and put us out of suspense."

"Sir James Ingram!"

There was a chorus of wonder and surprise, and some laughter too, but Lady Brabberstone did not laugh. Rachel, looking at her mother's face curiously, saw that it was white with anger as well as with dismay.

"Ah, you have not yet heard all!" she cried indignantly. "That poor old fellow, whom we all know so well and esteem so much, has been caught and trapped in his dotage by a bad, designing woman—Guy, you were well out of *that* girl—I congratulate *you* more than I can congratulate poor dear Sir James! It is Elizabeth Bertram whom he is fool enough to be about to marry!"

Guy Brabberstone turned very red, and a short and extremely unpolite monosyllable escaped from his lips, before he hid his angry face beneath the shelter of a silver beer tankard. Marcus Cunningham looked very straight before him at a letter which he seemed to be reading intently. To all appearance he had heard nothing. He was neither red nor pale—only there was a curious tightening of the corners of the lips, which might, had any one taken the trouble to notice it, have betrayed the secret of scorn and grief which his drooping eyelids were careful to conceal from the eyes of others. Within him there was for a moment an odd tumultuous throbbing, succeeded almost immediately by a dead and sickly coldness.

A man is often very ready to give up a woman of his own

tentions, and giving him up for some one else, it comes home to him in a very different way.

Lord Brabberstone was laughing.

"I do not believe it, my dear, I do not believe it! Alicia Bertram is as cunning a woman as I know, in her quiet way, but I do not believe she is clever enough to have got over old Jim Ingram! Let us see the letter, my lady; there is probably some mistake."

"There is *no* mistake unfortunately," replied his wife emphatically. "I have not only a letter from Alicia Bertram, but also one from Sir James himself announcing the same event. They evidently think we shall be all delighted—as though it were ever a creditable thing for a girl of nineteen to marry a man of over sixty!"

"Mamma, do not be so horribly uncharitable!" cried Rachel indignantly. "I cannot bear to hear you speak so unkindly of poor little Elizabeth; perhaps she is fond of Sir James."

Marcus lifted his eyes from his letter and looked at her. How much he liked her for that free and generous speech—how handsome she looked too, with that kindling flush on her cheek, and that gleam of indignant fire in her dark eyes.

Lady Brabberstone tossed her chin.

"Dear me, Rachel, do not get so excited. One would think you imagined the girl to be an inspired saint, and her mother a white winged angel! As if I didn't know where the attraction in poor dear Sir James lies!"

"Sir James Ingram is no doubt a rich man?" inquired Mrs Fletcher, who was perhaps the only person present who was not personally acquainted with the bridegroom elect.

"You are quite right, Mrs Fletcher. Sir James is a man of very good fortune, and Mrs Bertram would have married him herself long ago, if he had had as much money then as he has now; so now she has caught him for her daughter, as the next best thing she can do."

The conversation here became pretty general, and Lady Brabberstone returned to the study of Mrs Bertram's long three-sheeted letter,—presently she burst out laughing, and flung down the letter upon her plate.

"Well this beats everything!" she cried, "I find I had not half told you the news this wonderful woman has to impart. It appears that Mrs Bertram is going to be married herself, and to that most odious and vulgar personage Dr Fairgrave! He is our village doctor at Brabberstone, Lady Arthur—such a horrible man!"

"Ah, poor poor Elizabeth!" cried Rachel with agitation;

"that is why, no doubt, she accepted Sir James. I am sorry for her! How *could* she live with that dreadful man as a stepfather? It is indeed a happy thing for her to have the prospect of a home and a kind old husband of her own. Mamma, I shall go and write to her at once, and send my letter into Corrie Bridge this very day, so as to save a post."

She rose from the table, and, quick as thought, Marcus sprang to his feet and held open the door for her, looking at her as she passed him with eyes that were full of unbounded admiration and sympathy.

What a fine, noble creature she was; what a large generous heart she had, and what a broad honest mind! Never had Marcus Cunningham been nearer to loving her than he was at this moment; never had his heart and his instinct told him so plainly that he could scarcely go far wrong in following his father's advice, and in taking this beautiful and gracious lady to be his wife.

The luncheon party broke up. Marcus heard Lady Brabberstone remark that of course this double offence settled the question, and that she should certainly wash her hands of both mother and daughter, and drop their acquaintance at once. To which Lord Brabberstone replied, with some heat, that to talk of dropping the wife of Sir James Ingram was as ridiculous as it was impossible, although undoubtedly it might be difficult not to evince a certain coldness in the future treatment of "Mrs Fairgrave."

Marcus Cunningham went away by himself into the garden and sought consolation in solitary communion with a cigar. With a cool and equable mind he weighed the two women together in his mind, in a manner that did more credit to his intelligence than to his heart.

Elizabeth—as he thought of her, a pang, for all his self-control, shot through him, a pang of horrible regret and of unutterable jealousy—Elizabeth was vacillating and weak, infirm of purpose, and changeable in fancy—this was how he judged her. She would never have been the wife he wanted. She would have brought him no one single worldly advantage, nor even the support of character, and stability of conduct, which was absolutely needful to him in his upward career. She would have been a hindrance, never a help.

He told himself that he was well rid of her. She had coquetted with Guy Brabberstone, tempted, no doubt, poor silly child! by his position, and his future title; and now, although saved evidently by some unknown and providential
from "....."

vicious tendencies as Guy, she had nevertheless not scrupled, within a few weeks, to sell her fickle fancy to an old man with his money bags.

It did not occur to him that it was his own unworthy desertion of her which had left her, thus tempest-tossed and friendless, to buffet alone with the winds and waves of her fate. That view of the subject hardly crossed his mind at all. He had not loved her with sufficient depth to gauge his own conduct aright. Nor was he inclined to take any serious blame to himself for what seemed to him to have done her but little injury since she could so speedily forget him. Men are so ready to shift all the blame of their own misdoings on to a woman's shoulders; knowing, no doubt, how much a woman will bear in silence, and how difficult it is for her to defend herself, or to repudiate the cruelty of the man she loves.

As he walked up and down before the house, he could see Rachel sitting at the writing-table in the drawing-room window, writing no doubt her letter of congratulation to Elizabeth. Something in the sight of her engaged in such an occupation arrested him, so that he stood still and looked at her stooping figure, and the white hand travelling swiftly over the page.

A more impulsive man would no doubt have flung away his cigar and gone in at once and laid himself and his life at her feet. But Marcus Cunningham, save in that one ever-to-be-regretted instance of his life, was not prone to act upon the impulse of the moment. His father's training was strong within him, and his father had taught him to make up his mind slowly and securely, and never to do things of importance in a hurry. It was once only, when love blindfold had come unawares between him and a certain sweet-faced girl who had lain unconscious in his arms, once only Nature had triumphed over training, and Marcus had yielded unawares to the delirium of the moment's temptation. And had he not repented of it ever since? He was not at all likely to forget the lesson, and repeat the offence so soon.

So he only stood still and thought to himself that Rachel had a brave and noble character,—that she was neither weak nor vacillating, but strong and determined,—that she was a charming woman as well as a good one, and that upon the first suitable opportunity he would ask her to be his wife.

Since Elizabeth had treated him so badly, was he not perfectly justified in consoling himself elsewhere.

Many and many is the heart that is caught at a rebound. But sometimes it is not the heart but only the vanity, and never, never, never is it the same sweet dream of love and joy, because

there is always a bitterness about it, a savage longing for an unworthy revenge, and deep down at the very bottom of the soul a certain knowledge of the unreality and sham of it all.

Presently Marcus did go into the house and find himself in the drawing-room by Rachel's writing-table. She was just folding up her letter.

"I have been writing to Elizabeth Bertram," she said brightly. "Mamma was very unkind about her at lunch. I cannot bear injustice—it always makes my blood boil. I felt I must write the poor child a nice letter. You remember her, do you not?—the girl that had her arm broken, and fainted in that horrible crowd at Hamerton?"

Did he remember her?

He murmured an assent.

"Oh, yes; to be sure; I recollect now that you were very kind about her, and went to the Lodge to inquire after her, mamma said. Well, then, you must send her a message too," and she took the letter out of its envelope again; "she will appreciate a little message from you so much!—from our county member, you know. It will be an honour for little Elizabeth to find that you remember her."

"What shall I say?" he asked awkwardly. "I—I am not accustomed to congratulating young ladies who are going to be married."

"Oh, just say that you wish her happiness." She took up her pen again, Marcus stood behind her, looking over her shoulder, whilst she wrote down under his eyes at the foot of the letter:—"Mr Marcus Cunningham is staying here, and has been told of your engagement, and he desires me to say that he hopes you will be very happy."

"Thomas is ready on the mare waiting to take your letter, miss," here said the voice of the butler at the door.

So the letter was fastened up, and addressed, and started forth on its journey to the other end of England, with Marcus Cunningham's message within it.

Oh, had he known, could he have guessed, with what a torrent of tears, with what agony of despair, those words would be read! Could he have seen her stricken face, heard her broken mutterings of anguish and woe as she clasped that message all night long against her aching heart, surely, surely he might even then have repented him of the evil he had worked to her, and have put forth a hand to save her from her fate.

But men never do know or realise what they have done—these things are never brought home to them. And so to the

end of time women's hearts go on hardening or breaking, and the sinner goes unpunished, even by a pang of remorse ; whilst she who suffers, learns by slow degrees to hide her pain and to cover over her despair, until old time lends kindly hands to cauterise the wounds, and teaches her to show a fair face to the world, and to greet in after days, with smiling and untroubled eyes, the man who has wrecked her happiness and ruined her life.

For it is always the woman who goes to the wall, and always the man who goes scot-free to the end of his days.

This is the supreme philosophy as well as the unalterable injustice of the laws of this wicked world !

CHAPTER XIX.

LADY INGRAM'S "AT HOMES."

WHEN little Lady Ingram, after her six months' wedding trip, spent in Rome, in Vienna, and in Paris, settled down in the beginning of May in her husband's large and handsomely-decorated town house in Upper Belgrave Street, it is not too much to say that she took the world of London very much by surprise.

Sir James' friends—and they were numerous—had heard of his marriage to an unknown country girl with regret and dismay ; they had blamed him for committing such a blunder, and had pitied him sincerely for his folly ; but when they came to inspect his new wife, their blame very soon changed itself into commendation, and their compassion into envy.

They found, instead of the raw and awkward country lass they expected, a little lady with extremely graceful and finished manners, who received them with a certain quiet dignity, and bade them welcome with much sweetness and self-possession. When they came to talk to her, they discovered her to be original and intelligent in mind, and very bright and lively in conversation ; whilst instead of being vulgarly elated with her good fortune, as might have been expected, there was a gentle tinge of disappointment and sadness in her pretty eyes, and in the downward droop of her childish mouth, which imparted a vague but quite singular interest to her beauty, with which no mere flush of a radiant and defiant happiness could have possibly endued it. Added to which, she was really pretty, with a prettiness which grew daily, almost hourly, more fascinating and more attractive.

Marriage almost invariably turns a pretty girl into a beautiful woman ; and in Elizabeth's case the improvement in her looks was curiously noticeable. Taken away from the fretting worries of a specially harassing home life, surrounded by cares and attentions which had never been bestowed on her before, and with luxuries which she had never even heard of ; her every thought forestalled with affectionate tenderness, her lightest wish fulfilled with ready celerity, it is no wonder that the starved and pinched bud of her girlish prettiness expanded rapidly and freely into the full-blown flower of a beautiful womanhood. She was no longer the same creature as the sad, pale-faced girl, who with eyes red and heavy after a long night of tears, and lips tremulous with the conflict of a hopeless heart, had stood before Sir James Ingram, upon the sea-shore beneath the cliffs of Sandypoint, and had said to him brokenly,—

"I do not love you—I am not good enough for you—but I am broken-hearted and very helpless. My mother is going to marry again—she does not want me any longer. I shall have no home save a miserable one—if you still think me worth the taking, I will come to you—but it's a very poor bargain for you, and I think you had much better give me up."

Then the kind old man had taken her hands into his, and had answered her according to the chivalry and the tenderness that was in him.

"My dear, I do not think any bargain that gives me your sweet self could be thought a bad one ! I see that you are unhappy, and I shall hope to make you happier. I will expect nothing of you but what you can give me freely—but I want you for my wife, Elizabeth, and if you will trust yourself to me, I swear that I will be good to you."

She had not told him that she had already given her heart, and given it in vain. That confession had seemed to her to be a too humiliating one to be required of her ; but she had told him how her mother had wanted her to marry Guy Brabberstone ; and Sir James Ingram had conceived that for that persecution alone she was justified in accepting gladly any alternative that could remove her speedily from the care of such an unworthy protector as her mother had proved herself to be.

The weeks of her engagement passed like an evil dream—in after years Elizabeth always looked back to them with a shuddering horror. Mrs Bertram insisted upon being married on the same day as her daughter, and the preparations for the double wedding flung the small household into a chaos of millinery and decorations. Mrs Bertram was a typical bride-elect. She blushed and she simpered, smiled and sighed, all in

the most approved fashion. She tripped about the house like a maiden of twenty, filled to overflowing with satisfaction and flattered vanity. Her weak spine, her shattered nerves, her delicate heart, were all forgotten, and in the absorbing interest of the fit of the dove-coloured satin gown in which she was to be married, she remembered no longer that it was necessary to her existence to walk up and down for an hour upon the terrace, and to lie flat on her back for four hours daily upon the sofa.

In singular contrast to her mother, the other bride-elect lived and moved like one wrapped in a sad and inscrutable trance. Pale and languid, with lagging steps and sorrow-laden eyes, she seemed more like a novice preparing to quit the world for ever, than a bride within a few weeks of her wedding-day. To the last she did not abandon hope, not till the written message in Rachel's letter had shown her that hope was all in vain. Then indeed for a space her despair well-nigh overwhelmed her—she saw and understood that Marcus had never had any serious intentions towards her,—that he had won her love for a pastime,—had treated her—as Lady Brabberstone had told her he had treated other women—as a toy! After that conviction had come home to her absolutely and certainly, Elizabeth's pride awoke and grew apace upon the ruins of her shattered love. She shed no more tears for Marcus Cunningham, and her heart became as hard and as flinty as a little stone.

And there grew up within her a new and strange passion, which she had never in her life experienced before—a passion which was stimulating and life-giving, which enabled her to cover up her wounds, and to start forth upon her new life with energy and eagerness, mantling her face in smiles that were as cold as the sunshine upon snow : this passion was a keen desire for revenge and for retaliation.

"I will teach him to regret me," she said to herself, in her heart of hearts. "I had beauty enough to win him once in sport, I will win him once again in sober earnest. For every heart-pang that I have suffered for him, he in his turn shall suffer ten for me. I shall have all the help at my back that I have hitherto been without,—money to make myself fair in his eyes, my husband's name and position to make me a somebody instead of a nobody, and unlimited freedom to do as I like, and to turn myself and my life into whatever channels I please."

So, stimulated by this thought, the young bride held her head aloft upon her wedding morning, and plighted her troth to her old bridegroom, with tearless eyes, and a brave smile upon her white face.

"We will go abroad," she had said to Sir James. "I am

only a little unformed country girl, and I do not want you to be ashamed of me in society. Take me abroad first for six months. I shall pick up a little knowledge of the world; and you must teach me what to do, and how to get on, so that I may not disgrace you in London amongst your friends."

"I do not see that you need any improvement; but you shall do anything you like, my dear," he had answered fondly, and so they went abroad.

Elizabeth was quite right. She learnt more in those six months spent in the capitals of Europe than she could have done in a couple of years in England. She was receptive and adaptive, very quick to notice, and very wide-awake to all that was going on around her. Talents that might have slumbered within her for ever in the seclusion of her mother's country home, became quickened and cultivated into life in a wonderfully short space of time. She developed great social attractions both in conversation and manner, and a wonderful amount of *savoir faire*. Sir James, who had perhaps somewhat shared her apprehensions concerning herself at first, became quickly enchanted with her success; people congratulated him upon his choice, and sang his pretty wife's praises into his gratified ears. She became popular, and much sought after; the love of pleasure and of dress, natural to her age, awoke within her; she began to enjoy her life very much indeed, and to enter into the world about her with zest and animation. By the time they got back to England and settled themselves in Upper Belgrave Street, Lady Ingram was not in the very least a broken-hearted woman mourning over her lost love hopes, but a fresh, charming young matron full of life and spirit, and prepared to enjoy her first London season to her very uttermost.

Yet all the time deep down in her innermost being she was hardened and aged and bitter, and that craving for revenge still burnt and glowed within her like a living fire; whilst all sweet things of early hope and faith lay withered and dead, and the tenderness and womanliness of her were merged into the one great longing for a bad and cruel desire.

That is what a man who betrays a woman's trust does to her; and it is the worst evil under the sun that he can bring upon her.

Soon after the Ingrams were settled down in Upper Belgrave Street, Elizabeth had the good fortune to be taken in hand by Lady Arthur Millbanke. She could scarcely have found a more useful or charming friend.

Lady Arthur was enchanted with the young *debutante*, and took her up with a very furore of enthusiasm.

Sir James, who had known Lady Arthur for many years, and had a keen admiration for her, fully approved of her friendship for his wife. Elizabeth could not, in his eyes, have secured a better guide and guardian. Elizabeth looked upon Lady Arthur as a woman her senior by a very few years, and yet as one who was infinitely wiser and more experienced than herself; and she recognised in her a power which would facilitate the carrying out of all her wishes.

Lady Arthur and Lady Ingram soon became inseparable.

One sunny morning in the month of May, the two friends, having spent an hour in the Park and an hour at the lunch-table, were lingering together over their coffee cups in the dining-room in Upper Belgrave Street. Sir James, having swallowed a hasty lunch, had betaken himself to his club, and the two ladies were alone.

Lady Arthur, a tall, graceful, black-robed figure sparkling with jet beads, stood leaning against the mantelpiece. If the truth must be spoken, she was solacing herself with a cigarette, a weakness to which she was addicted in the strict confidence of intimate life.

Elizabeth reclined in a low arm-chair, slowly stirring her coffee with a tiny old-fashioned spoon. She looked very sweet and young in a fresh filmy muslin, that gave the impression of an extreme inexpensive simplicity, but which, as it was wreathed in soft folds of delicate laces, was probably a costume of fabulous extravagance. She glanced up admiringly at her friend, and thought how handsome she was, and how lovely were the glints of gold upon her hair, and how fortunate she was to be the chosen companion of one so beautiful and so clever.

"I shall be much disappointed in you, Elizabeth," Lady Arthur was saying, as she knocked the white ash of her cigarette off with the tip of her taper finger—"very much disappointed if you do not make something better of your life than a mere treadmill of senseless frivolity. You are so adaptive, and so intelligent, and so pretty too, my dear, that with your position and the money at your back, and a husband who will give you anything you want, you ought to find no difficulty in taking up a line of your own. You ought to be ambitious, my dear."

"Perhaps I am ambitious, Blanche," replied Elizabeth, setting down her cup,—“more so than you imagine, but—” and she stretched up her arms lazily behind her head, “but I do not think I know quite how to set about it, and what to do. Will you tell me, and help me?”

“Of course I will—I want to help you.”

"What am I to do?"

"You must have a *salon*."

"You mean that I must give evening parties?" inquired Elizabeth, with interest, and a little perplexity.

"Yes, and no. They must not be evening parties in the ordinary sense of the word—simply you must 'receive' every week on a fixed day, so that it may be an understood thing amongst those who will have the *entrée* of your house."

"This sounds very grand, but not perhaps very difficult," said Elizabeth, smiling.

"More so, perhaps, than you think; because, of course, these evenings must not be objectless—that is where so many women have tried it, and have failed. The *salon* of the last century always had its meaning and its importance. It was a political as well as a social rendezvous, where certain people of note in the world could always reckon with certainty upon meeting one another; that is what brought them to it, the knowledge that they would all be there. You must belong to a party. What are your politics, Elizabeth?"

For a few moments Lady Ingram gazed before her without speaking.

"I think," she answered slowly, "that I belong to the Liberal party."

"There is no Liberal party now, we are told," answered Lady Arthur, laughing. "You must call yourself a Unionist now-a-days. But, my dear, surely Sir James is a Conservative! Are you going to set yourself up for something else, out of contradiction?"

"Oh, not to James!" answered Elizabeth, looking up quickly; and then becoming conscious of what she had implied, she coloured furiously. "I mean, of course, I should wish to consult him; but I do not think he is a very keen politician. He likes clever men of all sorts and kinds. I have often heard him say so—there is good in all parties, and perfection in none."

She spoke very quickly and eagerly, as if anxious to hide her confusion, and to cover the slip of the tongue she had been guilty of.

Lady Arthur was as sharp as a needle—nothing ever escaped her notice. She looked down at Elizabeth's flushed face curiously, balancing her cigarette between her first and second finger, and blowing out a long thoughtful puff of smoke from between her well-shaped lips.

"Then there is some one else!" she said to herself. "I thought it could not be poor dear Jim Ingram only!" Aloud she said,— "It doesn't, you know, very much matter *what* you

call yourself, because all respectable people think alike now-a-days, although for the sake of argument we are obliged to pretend to differ. We all hate Gladstone, and wish him in heaven; and we are all dead sick of Ireland; and we all make a pampered baby of the People (with a big P), and say pretty petting things to it, that mean next to nothing, but that we are obliged to repeat, for fear it should turn round and rend us in a nasty way—like the baby in the French fairy story that turned into a griffin, and ran its claws into its nurse's throat. The only thing to do is to settle upon the section which you think will reflect most honour upon your own intelligence. It is stupid to call yourself a Tory now-a-days, because that sounds as if you didn't like progress, and were narrow-minded, and it's a cardinal sin to be narrow-minded now. You can't deliberately say you are a Liberal, because it is so very much in the minority to be a Liberal *pur et simple*. It will be better to give yourself a more elastic name, so that you may leave yourself an opening, and that you may, without loss of dignity, incline either to one side or the other, according as the circumstances of the future direct."

It will be seen from these remarks that Lady Arthur's political morality was at a very low ebb indeed.

"If I were you," she continued, "in spite of—what shall I call it—contrariness of heart? I should blend my opinions sufficiently with those of Sir James not to run counter to him—it would be better taste, to say nothing more. He is a Conservative of the old school—why should not you be a Tory-Democrat?"

"What is that?"

Lady Arthur shrugged her shoulders.

"I am sure I cannot tell you, my dear: I don't think they know themselves. It's something, I take it, like a sober drunkard, but it will give you a very wide margin, and enable all sorts of people to come to your evenings. Those who cannot come as Tories will come as Democrats, and *vice versa*. It will, as we are told of the English liturgy, have the sublime advantage of embracing all shades of opinion, and all sorts and conditions of men. I think it will do very well, Elizabeth,—your husband in the background as a Conservative of the old school—a solid, steady, respectable form—your little butterfly figure in the foreground, calling yourself a Tory-Democrat, with smiles for all persuasions. Your house will get a splendid character; there will be a strong leaning to the party in power, and a sneaking affection for the party likely to be power shortly—nothing could be better! I must hunt you up a Cabinet

minister or two, and a host of inferior celebrities to start you; then, of course, we must have beautiful women—beautiful and clever too, if we can manage the rare combination; a smattering of men of fashion, and a sprinkling of men of wealth.”

“Blanche! why have you never done all this for yourself?” cried Elizabeth laughingly.

“Oh, I, my dear! just think of my poor old dear, who has never had twenty people within his doors for the last dozen years; and then Lord Arthur’s fortune is not equal to it.”

“Does it cost so much then to have a *salon*?” inquired Elizabeth, in some dismay.

“Oh, dear no—light refreshments are all that is needed—it will cost very little indeed. All I mean is that it would be an impertinence to start such a thing without a good solid balance at your banker’s behind you—the world would not stand it. There are a great many other kinds of people who must not be unrepresented in your rooms,” she continued. “You must have savants and scientists, the most fashionable apostle of evolution, and the newest authority on chiromancy. You must have, of course, a few popular actors—no society is complete without them—the Russian poet with the unpronounceable name, and the Polish painter whose pictures are so much abused in the daily papers. Authors, of course, must be upon your list; and lady novelists who write startling love-stories; and some good-looking tenor, too, who will sing a song—not more than one—during the course of the evening. I must make you out a list.”

And, suiting the action to the word, Lady Arthur flung away the end of her cigarette, and sat down to the writing table in the window, and began jotting down names with astonishing rapidity upon a sheet of paper.

“You must settle upon Sunday evening, then you will get everybody. To begin with, to keep open house on a Sunday night in a Protestant country is like letting off a squib—it attracts general attention. Then it really is a good night. Men have never anything to do on the Sabbath—the theatres are closed, and their clubs are unpleasantly empty. To have somewhere to go to on a Sunday night is the distinct want of the male Londoner. They will look upon your evenings as a godsend.”

“My dear Blanche,” cried Elizabeth, laughing, “at what a pace you go, and how your imagination carries you away! Are you forgetting that I do not know any of these distinguished people whom you mention so glibly?”

“Oh, but you soon will, my dear. I shall see you through

it. Leave it to me—I know everybody, and I shall bring everybody here."

"I shall be very much afraid of most of them. A Cabinet minister must be a terrible person in private life—"

"Not at all. He is generally as mild as a mouse, and very fond of pretty women—"

"And authors—I have never talked to an author in my life—"

"And you expect to find them with ink-stains upon their fingers and wisdom upon their lips! My dear, they are very dull, common-place persons as a rule: they never talk in the least like their books; and the more delightfully they write, the more disappointing they are to meet."

Thus she rattled on gaily, working away at her list with the help of the Blue book.

Elizabeth lay back in her chair with a smile, watching her and listening to her running comments upon men and manners. She was thinking her own thoughts all the while.

Lady Arthur went on chattering.

"The Craddocks—they will do nicely. I shall ask old Lady Craddock to call on you. She is a dear old woman, the greatest gossip in the world. She will bring her pretty daughters. One of them plays the violin divinely, and looks like St Cecilia whilst she is playing—musical people rave over Flora Craddock. Cunniffes—hum—ha—no—I don't think you shall know them, they are dull, stupid people, without an idea or a thought beyond dinner. Oh, by-the-way, do you not know Sir Frederick Cunningham and his son?"

Lady Arthur's back was turned. Elizabeth gave a violent start, then she answered quite quietly,—

"I have met Mr Marcus Cunningham."

"Oh, that is all right then, because he must certainly have a card for your Sunday evenings. He is a very clever young man, one of the most rising of the new members. He made a capital speech upon the labour question, I hear, the other night; it was tremendously well spoken of."

"Indeed?"

"Where did you meet him? Oh, but how stupid of me to forget! Of course you know the Brabberstones. I remember now. They were country neighbours of yours. You told me so. No doubt it was at Brabberstone Castle you met him. The Brabberstones, you know, are not yet in town. Lord Brabberstone had the gout. They had to go to Buckstone. But I heard to-day that they would be in Grosvenor Street next week. By-the-way, you know, of course, that Rachael Brabberstone is engaged to Mr Cunningham?"

Lady Arthur turned suddenly round upon her chair.

"Good heavens, Elizabeth, are you ill?" she cried, springing to her feet; "you are as white as a sheet, child!—what is the matter?"

"It is nothing—nothing at all," said Elizabeth hurriedly; "this room is so hot—let us go upstairs."

After that Lady Arthur said nothing at all, but, like the bird of wisdom, she thought the more.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WHISPER OF SCANDAL.

LADY INGRAM's Sunday evenings were a success. Lady Arthur was as good as her word. She saw her through it, and launched her upon the troublous waters of political society. The world clamoured for Elizabeth's cards, and presented itself with avidity and eagerness at her house. Her two first Sunday entertainments were crowded from an early hour, whilst a select community prolonged the evening far into Monday morning.

Sir James smiled indulgently, and consented to the weekly upsetting of his house, but he secretly considered the whole thing a bore, and did not fail to take Lady Arthur's hint, that if he felt inclined to slip off to bed when he got tired, nobody would be the worse or the wiser for his defalcation.

"There is a great deal in youth, certainly," the good man said to himself, as he drew the sheets well up over his head, so as to deaden the clamour from below; "youth is certainly a beautiful thing—in moderation—in moderation; but now if I had married Elizabeth's mother instead of Elizabeth, I might perhaps have had a more restful existence. Ah, well! well! my little girl has never had any pleasure before, and I like her to enjoy herself," and so he turned over on his pillows, and was shortly transported into dreamland—his last waking thoughts being that he was glad Elizabeth was happy,—glad the society she desired to cultivate was so Conservative and so respectable, was glad her new gown suited her, and was finally glad to go to sleep in peace, and did so.

As for Elizabeth, it was all so delightful and so new to her, that she told herself she was quite happy, and had got over—everything!

Entertaining was a passion of delight to her. What we do well we always like doing, and she made an admirable hostess.

It is a gift which is as great as it is rare. Amongst fifty women who fill their houses with guests, there are perhaps not five who understand how to entertain them properly. A good hostess is like a general in an action; her eyes must be everywhere, her attention must never flag, the plan of her campaign must be worked out diligently and with unerring precision. Things must never be allowed to fall flat; she must possess a sort of instinct, a second sight, as to where her lines are likely to become weak or ineffective, and like a revivifying spirit she must straightway swoop down upon the feeble spot, and restore to it the animation and support of her presence. Your true hostess never thinks about herself or her own enjoyment. There is a class of woman who will duly stand at the head of her staircase, shaking hands automatically with her arriving guests, with a fixed smile upon her face, and the young man who is her special admirer standing all the while at her elbow, to while away the tedium of an hour which she plainly betrays to all-comers is an intolerable and unmitigated bore to her. After she has stood for a certain time in this cold and inhospitable fashion, she conceives that she has fully done her duty by her guests, and that the time has come to enjoy herself, and so she retires to some cosy sofa-corner with the same—or another—adorer, and troubles herself no further about them.

Now I have no hesitation in saying that a hostess must never enjoy herself—it is a social crime if she attempts to do so. Her entire evening must be given up to her guests—and notably to such of her guests whom she likes the least, and whose society is the least interesting to her. Nobody, however insignificant, must be overlooked; no one amongst the whole crowd must be allowed to go away and consider himself or herself to have been forgotten.

Then and then only will she be able to look back upon her entertainment with unmixed satisfaction, and to know that it will be marked in the minds of all who were there as a “success,”—not in point of numbers, or in the excellence of the supper, but from the simple fact that every one will have enjoyed themselves, will be sorry to go away, and will hope to be asked another time.

Elizabeth possessed this delightful faculty of entertaining well in a very high and marked degree. Nobody had told her what to do, or what to say, for it came to her by nature; and when she began to learn how great a value the world set upon it, she grew to take a pride and pleasure in the exercise of her natural gifts.

"I am never so happy as when I am moving about in my own house amongst a crowd of well-dressed and happy-looking people," she said afterwards to Lady Arthur; "it is such a pleasure to see everybody enjoying themselves."

"My dear, I am positively amazed at you!" replied her friend. "You are the very queen of hostesses! Where you learned it, I cannot imagine, for dear Lady Brabberstone never troubled herself about anybody but Rachel's suitors—the ineligible to be kept off, and the eligible to be nursed on! As to you, you are a wonder. You always bring the right people together, and keep the wrong people apart; you put everybody in a good temper in one corner, and then you go on and do the same in another; but then you work so hard, that I cannot conceive that you can be enjoying yourself."

"Oh, I get a great deal of pleasure out of it, I assure you. Why, the face of a friend across the crowd, or just a little smile as one goes by, is enough to supply all one's personal desires on such an occasion!"

There were no lack of friendly faces to greet her. When a woman has youth, beauty, and money, and is "pretty to look at and pleasant to talk to," men are not at all slow in finding it out. Elizabeth had many admirers—and the very fact of a certain little coldness in her manner to all, of a tendency to make no distinctions, but to be sweetly gracious to each, so that no one amongst them all could go away and conscientiously flatter himself that she had singled him out from amongst his fellows, increased the emulation between those who would fain have excited some more than common interest in the pretty young wife whose elderly husband retired so conveniently to bed, leaving her to hold her own in the whirlpool of society into which she had been suddenly flung.

Amongst her older adorers was a Secretary of State. Lord Dalmaine was nearly as old as Sir James Ingram, which did not prevent his falling as desperately in love with Sir James Ingram's wife as though he had been five-and-twenty. Elizabeth was very soon able to test the truth of Lady Arthur's remark that Cabinet ministers are no more impervious to the smiles of a pretty woman than are other less exalted personages.

Lord Dalmaine was a man of fine figure and an imposing presence. He talked well, both in public and in private; what he said was never perhaps brilliant or picturesque, but it was always sensible and to the point.

He was one of those steady and reliable men who are reckoned of infinite value to their party, by reason of the reputation for absolute "safety" which encompassed him as with a halo;

there was never any doubt at all as to how he would vote, or what sort of conduct might be expected of him.

Lord Dalmaine had a pleasant smile, a melodious voice, and charming manners ; added to which he had excellent business capacities, and a sound and remarkably clear-sighted judgment.

By dint of time and a long exercise of solid and sterling qualities, he had acquired a great influence amongst his fellows, and any recommendations and condemnations which emanated from him were certain to be received with much attention.

As a natural sequence, there were a great many smaller people, who were always trying, in round-about ways, to get on the right side of him. If there had been a Lady Dalmaine, they would no doubt have tried to get at him through her ; but Dalmaine was a widower, so there was no way of approaching him through the medium of family affection. But presently it began to be perceived that he had fallen desperately in love with little Lady Ingram, and then everybody began to see also that to get at Lady Ingram was quite the right and proper thing to do. All this was very new and somewhat bewildering to Elizabeth, who could not at first see the meaning of things of this kind ; and could not conceive why so many people were always asking her to use her influence with Lord Dalmaine, concerning things that did not interest her in the very least.

Dalmaine's attentions flattered her vanity, and his conversation amused and pleased her. She liked well enough to get the little notes about nothing at all, which came flying up to her in hansoms at all hours of the day, accompanied by flowers or boxes of bonbons. She liked to see that he singled her out in every room in which she found herself, and that people made way for him to get to her, and seemed to consider his rightful place to be at her side. All this was gratifying enough, for she was only twenty, and life was very new to her, and to be sought because she was clever as well as pretty, is an intoxicating thing to many an older and wiser woman than Elizabeth. What she did not know, nor indeed would anyone have cared to have told her, was that Dalmaine did not bear the best reputation in the world with regard to women,—that his successes had been notorious, and that the objects of his too-marked attentions had frequently been known to retire rapidly from their distinguished position into the obscurity of a well-merited oblivion.

What Elizabeth thought of chiefly in encouraging her elderly admirer, was that some day or other, sooner or later, when Lord Dalmaine was by her side, Marcus Cunningham would also be in the same room, and that he would see them together, and would takē note of it.

"He despised and deserted me once! but he will see that there are men older and cleverer than himself, men of his own world—into which he did not think me good enough to enter—who are glad enough to seek my society, and to give me their devotion!" This was what she said to herself, with an angry swelling at her heart, which she mistook, in her ignorance, for dislike and for hatred towards the man whom she had loved, but whom she was quite sure that she loved no longer.

Meanwhile Marcus Cunningham kept out of her way. He had heard of her Sunday evenings, of course, and had been told—although he scarcely believed in it—of her success and her popularity. He had even received early in the season a card, enclosed in one of Lady Arthur Millbanke's gushing little notes.

"Do come. My little friend is quite charming, and her house is going to be very much the fashion. I want you to know her. If you come, I promise you that you will enjoy yourself."

Lady Arthur had repented her of the invitation later on, but as the weeks went by, she hoped that he had never received her letter, for Cunningham had not yet availed himself of the invitation.

He did not want to go to Lady Ingram's house—he had no desire to meet her. What he desired to do was to put off the evil hour as long as possible, for of course he knew that it would be impossible to put it off altogether, and that he was bound to come across her somewhere very soon.

But just for the present he deemed that he was pretty safe. The Brabberstones were not in town—Lord Brabberstone was again laid up in Silshire by ill-health, and his wife and daughter were kept in the country in attendance on him. When they came up after the Whitsun holidays, they would of course go to Lady Ingram's house; and where Rachel Brabberstone went, there Mr Cunningham conceived that it would be his duty to go too. But the moment for this had not yet come.

Marcus and Rachel were quite a model pair of lovers. Whilst they had been together in the country, they had ridden or walked together daily. They had danced all the round dances with each other at the Christmas balls, and whether they were in public or in private they were invariably polite and pleasant to one another. When they were apart they wrote agreeable and affectionate letters to each other three times a week, and on the writing-table of each stood a large-sized photograph of the other, in a frame of crimson velvet, richly emblazoned with gold clamps at the corners.

Both were persuaded that to marry one another was the most satisfactory arrangement that life could possibly hold out

to them, and both were firmly convinced that they had consulted not only their best interests, but also their truest happiness, in agreeing to be united for the remainder of their existence.

But, curiously enough, neither of them was in the very least anxious that the realisation of their earthly paradise should take place at an early date. They were not at all in a hurry to be married, and the exact moment when their bliss was to be consummated had not so much as been mentioned between them.

Nevertheless, it did not come into Marcus Cunningham's mind that, from prudential motives, he had better keep out of Lady Ingram's way, lest he should be tempted to repent him of his engagement, because, as a matter of fact, he did not repent of it in the very least. He was very glad that he was going to marry Rachel, and the passing feeling he had once experienced towards Elizabeth was now, he believed, absolutely and entirely obliterated within him by other interests and other ties; so that it did not occur to him that it could ever, by any remote possibility, be revived. What he did experience now with regard to Elizabeth, was a slight feeling of shame concerning his past treatment of her, and an intangible sense of disquiet, which almost amounted to mortification, that she, whom he had scorned and passed by, should, in spite of his rejection of her, have done so exceedingly well for herself in the eyes of the world.

For these unacknowledged and impalpable causes he kept out of her way, and would no doubt have continued to do so, but for a certain conversation to which he was one day an unwilling listener.

Marcus was sitting after lunch one afternoon in the smoking-room of the Carlton Club, and two men with whom he was only very slightly acquainted were conversing together within ear-shot of him. They were idle men of fashion, to whom the doings of the world in which they lived were of far greater import than the politics of Europe. As such, their talk had not much interest for Cunningham, who was engaged over his mid-day cigar in making notes of a case upon which he expected that he would most likely be called upon to speak in the House before the conclusion of the session.

He was not listening at all to what was being discussed upon the adjoining sofa, but suddenly his attention was arrested by the mention of Lady Ingram's name.

Now there is a charming and beautiful theory which has been preached to women for so long that a great many of them still firmly believe in it. It concerns the sanctity of a lady's name, and the moral impossibility that it should ever be mentioned

within the high-toned and exalted moral atmosphere of a London Club. We have been assured over and over again that any man would be looked upon as a blackguard, and duly ostracised as such, were he but to mention a woman's name in familiar discourse within these hallowed precincts. Many of us, indeed, have staked a good deal upon this assurance, and have comforted ourselves and taken heart of grace over the flattering delusion.

But that it is a delusion, I do not hesitate to say. Whatever may have been the code of honour of our fathers and grandfathers, in the days when they were frequently called upon to answer for an idle word with their swords or their pistols, ay, even with their very lives, it is absolutely certain that now that this all-powerful restriction is removed, our modern gentleman is not troubled, and does not trouble his fellows, with any such over-scrupulous notions of delicacy. Why, indeed, should the same men who gossip freely and not always charitably about their fellow-creatures, women as well as men, in every drawing-room in Mayfair and Belgravia, be supposed to lay an embargo upon their tongues directly they enter the one house where above all they may be supposed to be at home, and absolutely at their ease?

It is not in human nature, it is not in common-sense, that they should do so; and there is no reason why we should believe that the portals of their clubs exercise such a purifying and hallowing influence upon them. The man who talks scandal, and delights in twisting every circumstance to the disparagement of his fellow-creatures, will continue to do so in every situation in which he finds himself, and in every position of life in which he is placed; and because nobody wants to make himself conspicuous or to pick a quarrel about what does not concern himself, there will always be found other men, more charitable no doubt, but no less culpable, who will sit, disapproving perhaps, but saying nothing, because they do not think they can do any good by interfering.

On the present occasion, the two men by whom Lady Ingram's name was mentioned were not saying any harm of her. One man said he had been to one of her evenings, and the other said he wanted to get a card for them, if he could manage it. The fortunate individual who had been admitted to the delights of Upper Belgrave Street gave an animated description of the entertainment, after which they both fell to work to discuss the lady's charms, critically and approvingly, and Marcus Cunningham pretended, and pretended only, to go on with his notes, whilst he listened with all his ears.

He wanted to catch every word that was said of her ; why, he could not exactly have told, nor the wherefore of the strange and expectant interest with which he strained every nerve, so as not to lose a single syllable of it.

He heard at last what possibly he waited for. It was not very bad, but it was enough.

"They say old Dalmaine is on there now," remarked one man.

"Old rip ! he always picks up the newest thing in the market," replied the other, laughing.

"I can't myself see what fascination there can be in him for a pretty woman, yet they all seem to go for him."

"Well, he's a distinguished man in a way, you know, and clever and agreeable ; women like all that sort of thing, especially an intelligent woman like Lady Ingram, who has set herself to 'get on'—she thinks it a distinction, no doubt."

"Ah, poor little fool ! does she ? I wonder dear Lady Arthur Millbanke doesn't give her a friendly warning ; *she* ought to know well enough that it doesn't do a woman's name any particular good to be coupled with Dalmaine's."

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"My dear fellow ! why should Lady Arthur interfere ? She no doubt does not wish to make herself unpleasant. Little Lady Ingram will have to go through the fire like the rest of them. Some of them are fire-proof, I daresay, or say they are ; but most of them get scorched, and survive it ! It will be rather an amusing thing to watch this particular little person, and see whether her country bringing-up and presumable ignorance and innocence will be against her, or whether her natural wit and tact will stand her in good stead in the unequal fight ! She is a clever little lady, I should think, but I expect to derive a good deal of entertainment out of her future career, just as a study of human life !" and the young man laughed quite pleasantly and genially, as though Elizabeth and her fate were a new and piquante dish specially prepared and concocted for his private delectation.

Marcus Cunningham's heart was thumping oddly and unpleasantly within him ; there was that curious singing in his head which warns a man that he is on the point of losing his temper ; it was on the tip of his tongue to speak words of angry and defiant reproof,—to cry out, "She is my friend ; how dare you discuss her name and her reputation ?" but then prudence, and that habit of caution which was second nature to him, restrained him, and kept him back from leaping up to champion her.

Both these men knew that he was engaged to Miss Brabberstone, what then might they not fairly imagine were he to take up angry cudgels for Lady Ingram? As before, the coldness of his second thoughts, which were all for himself, over-rode the generosity of his first impulses, which were all for her.

He remained silent. What good, he asked himself, can any man do to a married woman by constituting himself the defender of her name? He only gives rise to unpleasant suspicions concerning his interest in her, and makes himself a laughing-stock into the bargain.

So he went back to his blue books and his marginal notes, and said nothing at all. But all the time his heart—which he would so gladly have silenced too—went on beating and thumping within him in a strange and unaccustomed tumult.

Presently the two men got up and sauntered away out of the smoking-room.

And after they had gone, Marcus Cunningham got up too, and as he stood leaning against the mantel-shelf, and knocked the white ash off his cigar into a little marble ash-tray that lay under his hand, he said aloud to himself,—

“But next Sunday—next Sunday I will go there myself and see.”

CHAPTER XXI.

LADY ARTHUR GIVES HER ADVICE.

THE day which brought Rachel Brabberstone up from Brabberstone Castle, in Silshire, to her father's house in Brook Street, brought with it no such corresponding pleasure or satisfaction as might have been expected from a translation from the quietude and stagnation of the country to the varied excitements of London life in June. Lord Brabberstone's illness was over; her mother was delighted to get him well, and to get away from the country; Guy had mercifully betaken himself on a friend's yacht to Corfu and the Ionian Archipelago; there were therefore no domestic troubles to harass her, and yet there was a weight as of lead at Rachel's heart.

Nevertheless she was undoubtedly glad to see Marcus, when he duly appeared at the dinner-hour on the evening of her arrival in London. He came just as dinner was about to be announced, and the presence of her parents, as well as one or two intimate friends whom they had also invited, prevented any lover-like effusion in their cordial yet perfectly self-controlled meeting.

Marcus always managed these little details with so much discretion and tact, that Rachel was secretly grateful to him.

As a matter of course they went down to dinner together, and Rachel, whose cheeks wore their country roses, looked very handsome and animated, and quite justified Lady Arthur Millbanke's private opinion, as she sat opposite to them, that she had every appearance of being perfectly happy.

"It is certainly a most suitable match," said Blanche Millbanke to herself, as she looked at them curiously across the bowls of Marshal Niel roses on the table. "It is next to impossible that such an engagement can have a single drawback ; and, besides, they have known each other for years. I wonder then why my little Elizabeth has a *tendresse* towards him, and why I saw him look so savage last Sunday night ; and, yes, I certainly wonder too why on earth so desirable and admirable an engagement is not carried out !"

For Lady Arthur was the most knowing person under the sun ; and a long experience of the world had made her very suspicious ; so that no sooner had the idea presented itself to her, than she began to be perfectly certain that here must be a weak point in this seemingly flawless arrangement, and that for some inscrutable reason Marcus Cunningham was not in a hurry to be married.

And after that she watched the lovers more carefully than ever.

They looked happy enough certainly. Their heads leant together in an interested manner, and they talked incessantly ; but when Lady Arthur, in the intervals of her host's somewhat ponderous sentences, managed to catch scraps of their conversation, these broken fragments were sufficient to fill her with surprise, as well as with food for further cogitation.

"When do you think it will be ?" she heard Rachel ask.

"Not till quite the end of the session."

"I have my doubts about it being desirable at all," demurred Rachel.

"Good heavens !" thought Lady Arthur, "can she be speaking of her marriage ?"

"Well, they seem to think I should be the best man."

"He must mean bridegroom, not best man," muttered Lady Arthur, feeling quite mystified.

The next words enlightened her darkness.

"Lord Salisbury himself wishes me to speak."

"Then that is another matter, of course ; it is certainly a grand chance for you—upon such a subject too !"

This told the listener that nothing more romantic than a speech in the House was under discussion.

"When I was a girl, and was engaged to my poor dear," commented Lady Arthur to herself, "we certainly found more romantic subjects of conversation when we were together than do the young people of the present day. There doesn't seem to be much sentiment about this pair of lovers."

She was perfectly right—there was neither romance nor sentiment, only certain matter-of-fact and prosaic considerations, and a community of tastes, which rendered them both perfectly willing to cast in their lot with one another.

"And so our little friend Elizabeth Bertram has developed into quite a great lady, under Sir James's care, I hear," said Lady Brabberstone across the table.

For an empire Lady Arthur could not have resisted casting a swift glance at Cunningham before she replied. Marcus looked impassive, and finished the remark he was making to his neighbour about Universal Suffrage, with an absolutely imperturbable serenity.

Yet Lady Arthur was certain he had heard.

"Oh, yes," she said, in answer to her hostess. "She really is a most delightful little woman. I am so fond of her; and she is quite the rage just now."

"Wonderful! Who would have believed it? But then you have taken her in hand, Blanche."

"Oh, really, I have had next to nothing to do with it. She is a born mistress of the art of society. Certainly I did help her to start her Sunday evenings, to which all the world is thronging every week. By-the-way, Mr Cunningham, did I not see you there last Sunday?"

Marcus looked up suddenly; for one half second he paused, and there was something almost of confusion in his glance: it was gone directly. But that half second of hesitation settled his fate in the eyes of the clever woman of the world, whose perceptions in these matters almost amounted to second sight.

"Then there *is* something!" said Blanche Millbanke to herself. "I was sure of it! I wish I had never sent him that unlucky card!"

Marcus answered her politely and gravely.

"Yes; I certainly looked in for a few moments; but it was very late, and I was unable to stop." Then turning to Rachel, with a charming smile, he added,—"You, no doubt, will be going to Lady Ingram's next Sunday? Then we can go together, can we not?"

But that did not deceive Lady Arthur in the very least. It was well done, no doubt, but she saw through it.

"Certainly we shall go to Elizabeth's next Sunday!" here exclaimed Lord Brabberstone heartily. "I shall be delighted to see my little friend, with her new honours upon her. You had better dine here first, Marcus, and your excellent father too, and we can go on together to Upper Belgrave Street. Did Elizabeth tell you that she knew we were coming back this week?"

"Mr Cunningham had no opportunity of speaking to Lady Ingram," put in Lady Arthur, looking at him with a smile of seraphic sweetness. "He stopped so short a time, and Elizabeth was surrounded, as usual. Those who want to speak to her have to wait their turn."

"Dear little Elizabeth," said Rachel, coming, quite innocently and unexpectedly, to the rescue of her lover, of whose perplexity she had not the remotest suspicion; "how odd it seems to fancy her a fashionable woman, with a tribe of admirers about her, when only a year ago she was nothing but a little country girl living in our village, who almost burst into tears of delight at the notion of coming to a little after-dinner dance at Brabberstone!"

"Ah, my dear, some women become worldly and fond of dissipation in a miraculously short time, if they are given the opportunity!" remarked her mother, with a little show of asperity and ill-temper, for Lady Brabberstone had never forgiven, never would forgive, the girl who had dared to refuse her black sheep of a son.

Lady Arthur looked at Marcus, but as Marcus said nothing, she observed quietly that there was but one opinion in London about Lady Ingram, and that a most favourable one; and the conversation passed on to other things.

After dinner, just before the men came up to join the ladies, Blanche Millbanke, who had been making herself most agreeable to them all, went and stood by herself in the back drawing-room, and made believe to examine some photographic views that lay upon the table.

She had not stood there twenty seconds before Marcus Cunningham came up and joined her. Blanche was clad in a white satin gown, which fitted her beautiful figure to perfection. The order of her beauty was such that she could afford to dress with a certain stern rigidity of outline which less well-made women could not venture to affect. She was not afraid any more than if she had been eighteen, to display the cream white of her neck and arms, unsoftened by the kindly shade of lace and tulle, against the dead white of her satin gown. She

wore scarcely any jewellery ; only a glittering diamond beetle crowned her gold-glinted hair, and quivered and trembled in the candle light as she moved. When she looked up with a smile at Marcus Cunningham's approach, she did not seem in his eyes to be a day older than thirty, and yet he knew for a fact that she was much more.

"I am so glad to find you here, I wanted to say a few words to you, Lady Arthur."

She knew that quite as well as he did, and answered laughingly,—

"How considerate it was of me to give you such an easy opportunity, Mr Cunningham !"

"I wanted to speak to you about—about—Lady Ingram."

Lady Arthur lifted her eyebrows at him, and smiled, and then she nodded her golden head at him. Marcus looked down at a photograph of the Coliseum, on the table—then as she did not speak, he looked up again, and blurted out, roughly and unguardedly,—

"You are not going to stand by and see her go to the devil, I suppose ?—you, who profess to be her friend !"

"My dear, dear fellow !" cried Lady Arthur, uplifting both her hands in virtuous horror, "what a dreadful, terrible, wicked thing to say ! And what can you possibly mean by such a cruel insinuation ?" But if there was horror in her words, there was laughter in her eyes—laughter brimming over like sunshine, and rippling over her face in a very cascade of merriment ; for Marcus had shown his cards by his too outspoken words, and Lady Arthur knew that she had got the whip-hand of him. "Why should you lay such dreadful things to my dear little friend's charge, or use such a naughty word about her ? My little Elizabeth, who is so beloved by her husband, and so happy and good in her married life."

"Lady Arthur, do not put me off with empty words !" he cried earnestly. "You are one of the cleverest women in the world."

"Thanks so much, my dear boy."

"And you know as well as I do, what things mean, and what dangers surround a young and innocent girl, flung unprotected into the whirl of London life."

Lady Arthur opened her eyes.

"Why do you call her unprotected ? Is she not married to dear old Sir James—the best and most delightful old fellow in the world ? Is not her protector her husband ?"

Marcus made a gesture of indescribable contempt and impatience.

"Ah, you are trifling with what you know to be the truth ! What can poor old Jim Ingram understand of the danger into which she is already running ?"

"What danger ?" this time Lady Arthur did not smile at all, and there was a steely glitter of defiance in her pale blue eyes.

"You ask me *what* danger, when Dalmaine never leaves Lady Ingram's elbow ?—a man whose character is notorious with regard to women,—whose successes are his boast. Will you not warn her—open her eyes to what he is—drag her back from the precipice near which she is hovering—stand between her and what may too possibly be her undoing ?"

He spoke with agitation, and his voice, although from necessity not loud, was trembling with the earnestness of his appeal.

Lady Arthur looked at him gravely and curiously. What fools men are, she said to herself ; how easily even the wisest and the most cautious of them loses his common-sense when his jealousy with regard to the one woman who is most to him, is fairly awakened ! Lady Arthur was sure of it now ; but she made up her mind to put him to one more test,—to give him one more stab, before she turned round on him.

She shrugged her shoulders, slightly stroking her chin softly with her white feather fan.

"You credit me with supernatural powers, my good friend. How can I help it, or avert the evil, or alter the course of events, if what you say is true, and Lady Ingram be already desperately in love with the ever fascinating and delightful Dalmaine ?"

Marcus Cunningham's face was suddenly swept as by a hurricane. Blanche could never have believed that such a very tempest of feeling could have been evoked by her simple words—horror, anger, and jealousy chased each other in rapid succession across his features, like wind clouds that are riven by the storm across the sea.

"Good God ! you cannot mean it ! It cannot be true that she loves the man !" he muttered brokenly.

Then Lady Arthur looked at him steadily and said tranquilly,—

"I know no more of Lady Ingram's feelings than you do—I don't want to know them. What I *do* want to know, my dear fellow, is what on earth it has got to do with you ?"

And her quiet sobering eyes seemed to look him through and through. They seemed to say to him, "You have got Rachel, and the Brabberstone connection, and your advancement in the House, and your forthcoming speech about the Agricul-

tural Labourer, to think about ; why trouble yourself so much about a woman who is no concern of yours ? ” If she had spoken the words, they could not have been brought home to him more vividly than by that curious expression.

“ Take my advice, my dear boy ”—Lady Arthur often called young men her dear boys,—“ leave Lady Ingram alone. People who are set upon self-advancement and self-improvement, had always best refrain from mixing themselves up with the affairs of other people—”

This was a harsh cut at him, and Marcus winced beneath it. Lady Arthur knew quite well that he was a selfish and calculating young man, and that he had been brought up to be so by the careful hands of his father, whom she also knew very well indeed.

“ You are very hard on me, Lady Arthur,” he said humbly, bending his head again over the photographs on the table.

“ Do you deserve anything but hardness ? ” she asked him ; and Marcus knew very well that he did not, and was silent.

“ Take my advice, and do not go to Lady Ingram’s parties again,” she continued. “ It is not at all in your line to look after flighty young women, and it will not do you any good to pose as her protector. Take my advice, the advice of a person you are kind enough to say is ‘ one of the cleverest women in the world,’ and do not go to my little friend’s evening parties.”

But she knew very well, even as she spoke the words, that men never take advice upon such a subject, and that he would be certain to go.

“ He is very selfish and very cautious,” she said to herself, “ but for all that, Elizabeth has bewitched him, and he has got a morsel of heart for her somewhere ! I wish he would keep out of her way, for her sake, but he will not. No man ever does. The very selfishness which has made him what he is, will make him go to her house, in spite of my warning.”

“ Now what are you two conspiring about together ? ” here cried Rachel’s voice, breaking in upon their colloquy.

“ My dear girl,” replied Lady Arthur, who was never taken unawares under any circumstance whatever, nor ever was known to be at a loss for a ready answer, “ I was giving Mr Cunningham excellent advice, which, I know very well, he will not follow. I was telling him to work hard, and not to dance about too much after you to balls and parties. He ought to stick to his career, you know, Rachel.”

“ So I always tell him,” said Rachel, with that sweet gravity which became her so well. “ And I am quite sure that he will not be insensible to our united opinions.”

Lady Arthur shook her head, and passing her arm round the girl's waist they strolled together into the front drawing-room.

When Lady Arthur was wishing her hostess good-night, she said to her,—

"When is Rachel to be married? Not fixed yet? Oh, if I were you, I would arrange the wedding for the end of the session, say the 1st of August. He could easily pair for the rest of the time. It unsettles a man so much to be engaged to a girl; it is so much better to get him married, and recover it. Take my advice, Lady Brabberstone, get the wedding-day fixed; Rachel will be all the happier."

And Lady Brabberstone was very much more disposed to profit by Lady Arthur Millbanke's sensible and good advice than was Marcus Cunningham, M.P., who perhaps would scarcely have thanked her had he overheard her.

Driving home in her brougham through the shadowy darkness of the June night, with only the gleam of the gas lamps to look in upon her meditations, Lady Arthur thought it all over, and strengthened herself in her own opinions.

She was genuinely fond of Elizabeth, and as she had taken her up as a special *protégée* of her own, her pride and her credit were at stake that no evil should befall her. Why, thought Blanche, should not Elizabeth be as fortunate as she herself had been? Why should she not manage to keep at the flood of the tide, at the pinnacle of her prosperity, and yet steer clear of all the pitfalls and snares into which so many foolish women, after a year or two of folly and of vanity, manage to tumble headlong and be heard of no more?

There is no impossibility about it.

"Fifteen years ago," said Blanche to herself, "I was considered the handsomest young woman in London—I do not call myself the worst-looking one to-day! I was run after and courted just as much as Elizabeth is, and more. I had an invalid husband, who never went out with me. Nobody ever called me a prude, or found fault with me for being stupidly and dully strait-laced; and yet nobody, not even my worst enemy, was ever able to cast any mud at me, nor to this day has a breath of slander ever done me an injury. Why should not Elizabeth do the same? As to Dalmaine, that will do her no harm; she is quite safe there; she does not care about him. I can see that he bores her already, and when a man bores a woman, it is a worse look-out for him than when she dislikes him. That is not where her danger lies: it is Marcus Cunningham who is the real danger for her. She has loved him once,

bably behaved badly to her in the past. He is the sort of man, I think, who would be likely to treat a woman ill. Pique and jealousy combined have revived a sort of spurious interest in her. He is capable of making her very unhappy. It shall not be my fault if he has the chance of doing so, for I mean to take care of my little Elizabeth,—of her heart as well as of her character."

And with that her brougham drew up at the tiny house in Chapel Street, and Lady Arthur was very soon tucked into her soft bed, and had sunk into that sweet and dreamless "beauty sleep" which a prudent regard for her handsome self caused her to value so highly.

CHAPTER XXII.

SQUIRE SHERWOOD LOSES HIS LUNCH.

SQUIRE SHERWOOD was up in London. He was growing an old man now, and it had been a very great effort to him to work himself up to the pitch of coming to town. He thought about it quietly during all the latter part of April and the beginning of May. Towards the middle of May he asked the advice of the village doctor, and further consulted the clergyman, and also that very same Dr Octavius Drummond who had been Headmaster at Oldchester Grammar School in the days when young Vere was laboriously pursuing Latin and Greek there, and who had pronounced the boy to be so utter and complete a failure. Strengthened in, or at least not dissuaded from, his intentions by the combined wisdom of these notabilities, Mr Sherwood ventured to break the news of the great and impending event to old Mary the housemaid. He had a little matter of business to attend to, he told her, which he thought would shortly necessitate a journey up to London.

Mary, who was now well-stricken in years, tossed her chin indignantly.

"Business, indeed! what business could take a respectable man gadding up to London, with the hay standing nearly ready to be cut, she should like to know? No good ever came of gallivanting up to them places, that are no better than Babylon, of which the Scriptures warn us. Business, indeed! Look at the young gentlemen, sir, that's the way they've all gone, every one of 'em, and never a one comes back to the old home for more than twenty-four hours at a time; that's what comes of going up to them wicked towns, as is destruction to all decent-

Then Mary, emboldened by the friendship of long and faithful service, inquired furthermore what the business might happen to be which was about to take him to the City of Sin? But the good man could not answer that question, because, of a truth, there was no business,—only a vague yearning at his heart over that son who had been so long estranged from him, and of whose doings the faint echoes came to him only through the pages of an occasional newspaper notice.

All his sons were out in the world—even the twins were doing well in Melbourne, and sent cheerful letters by every mail, to tell the old man of their prospects. Those who were abroad, and those who were in England, all, with one significant exception, wrote to him regularly, and three of them, and sometimes a fourth, ran down now and again to Sherwood for a night, and never failed to gather about his table at Christmas time. But the son whom he had disowned never wrote, and never came. He had shaken him off and reviled him, and from him there came never a sign or a line. And yet he was only in London!—only a four hours' journey lay between them; but then a gulf wider than space and broader than time divided that son from his father's house.

What had become of Vere? What was he doing? How was he living? Was it true that he was a great man, and that by some strange freak of fortune he had done something or other which the old man could not well make out, which had mysteriously raised him, instead of degrading him in the world?

All these things were a great puzzle to Squire Sherwood, and kept him awake, wondering and fretting through many a winter night that year. For news came but slowly to Sherwood House, and even in Oldchester the good folks were sadly behindhand in things that did not immediately concern the welfare of the town and municipality. When the Squire read the *Times*, which he did regularly every night after his dinner, he turned instinctively to the sporting news, and then he glanced at the telegrams, and gave half an eye—and a very sleepy one—to the first of the leading articles, after which his pipe and his paper usually dropped simultaneously out of his hands, and he snored comfortably and happily in his armchair, with his mouth open and his legs stretched out, until Mary came in to tell him it was time to go to bed. It was, perhaps, no wonder therefore that in the small corner devoted to musical notices and advertisements, his son's name should have managed altogether to escape his notice.

Yet news did come to him about Vere in a roundabout way. Once a friend in London whom he had not heard of for years,

wrote to him to ask if it were possible that the wonderful Vere Sherwood, whose beautiful compositions were so much talked about, could by any chance be a son of his. And the old man was so angry that he never answered the letter. Another time, an elderly lady, a country neighbour, drove ten miles across the hills to come and tell him that her niece had been to hear Vere sing at a concert, and had written to her in perfect raptures about him. This also made him angry. He pished and he poohed, fidgeted about on his chair, and muttered and scowled until his kind neighbour felt sorry she had come, especially when he asked her indignantly whether she looked upon him as a child, to come telling him such a pack of nonsensical rubbish, that could give no sensible person any pleasure to hear about.

And once with his own eyes Squire Sherwood saw a big advertisement in large letters at the station at Oldchester Junction, concerning the Albert Hall, and an Oratorio by Vere Sherwood, that was to be performed thereat. The Squire had but a dim idea what took place in the Albert Hall, and a still more confused comprehension as to what an oratorio was. "Some play-acting brass band tomfoolery," he muttered savagely to himself, as he turned on his heel from the offensive placard that had dared to contain his son's name; and for the rest of the day he had gone on grumbling and swearing to himself in the very worst of conceivable bad tempers. But that night he had lain awake a very long time, and had thought about it all a very great deal. And by degrees there had grown up in his heart a longing that was at first vague and intermittent, but which grew and grew upon him daily with greater strength and intensity; a longing to see this son of his, of whom such faint and wonderful echoes came back to the house of his birth, and from whom he had been so long estranged. He wanted to see him, to hear for himself, and then perchance to make his peace with him ere he died.

"I am growing old now," he said in his heart; "perhaps if I wait any longer it may be too late. I would like to see the boy once more."

For that is the rare and beautiful thing about a parent's love. It can never be extinguished. You may smother it away, or stifle it down, and cover it up, but you cannot put it out. It is always there, deep down under everything, ready to kindle forth again into flame at the smallest spark. Years cannot crush it, nor yet anger or neglect. You may stamp it down into powder under your heel, or bury it beneath a mountain

day, when perhaps you least expect it, it will spring up again and flourish and flower as freshly and as strongly as ever.

And this is more especially the case when the child that is loved has angered or disappointed his parent; then all the bitterness has been heaped up in vain, and all the wrath will melt away like snowdrifts in the sun.

One day Squire Sherwood began, much against his reason and his principles, to find out causes why he might have been in part to blame with regard to Vere, and excuses which might with justice be made for him.

"Perhaps I was over hasty," he said to himself in those night watches, when he lay awake and pondered over it all; "perhaps I judged him hardly; perhaps there was stuff in the boy after all."

And there grew upon him so great a desire to go up to London and to seek out the lost sheep for himself, that he could no longer restrain himself from obeying the impulses that were tugging at his heart-strings.

So Mary was compelled to pack his portmanteau, shedding oceans of tears over his socks and shirt-fronts in the doing of it, and it came to pass that Squire Sherwood found himself in Piccadilly, on the sunny side of it, one day early in the month of June.

To walk at mid-day from Charing Cross to Hyde Park Corner and not to meet a single familiar face, is a trial which very few of us have been called upon to undergo. Yet that was what happened to Squire Sherwood on this particular June day. It was twenty years and more since he had been in London, and he found himself forgotten.

For London is the most exacting of mistresses. A man must woo her always, worship her incessantly, adore her without interruption, if he desires her to smile upon him. Nothing but a course of the most assiduous and uninterrupted attentions can win her favour. If a man turn away from her, and neglect her but for one single year, then he will surely come back to find her changed and altered, cold in her greeting, and cruel in her disregard of him.

After a twenty years' absence, London was a city of the dead to our friend: Pall Mall was no better than a yawning void, and Piccadilly a hungry desert.

He walked along in his solitude like one in a dream, wondering what had become of his old friends, and of the familiar faces that used to throng the footways and nod friendly greetings at him as he went by. Were they all dead and gone? he wondered,

hurried along the streets, entirely made up of strangers who had never heard of him? Not all—for here and there he thought he recognised some one or other of his old acquaintances. There surely was a face, grizzled and wrinkled, it is true, but still a face that he seemed to know—and he smiled and made as though he would have stopped; but his only welcome was a blank stare, and a look of absolute unrecognition. Either he had made a mistake, and his memory had deceived him, or else—and indeed this was far more likely—the Club friend of a bygone day had utterly forgotten him.

The old man proceeded sadly and rather wearily on his way. He felt very lonely in this great and busy turmoil of life and fashion. He was more at his ease in the lanes about Sherwood, where every rough labourer knew him, and touched his dirty cap, and stopped only too gladly to have a chat with the "Th' Squire." Here, he was out of it all.

He had no idea where to seek the son he had come up to find. There was a vague, stupid idea in his mind that as Vere had given up a serious profession for one that savoured of frivolity and dissipation, he would, no doubt, form one of the idle crowd who lounge through their summer mornings on either side of the Row.

But when he turned into the Park at Hyde Park Corner, he scanned in vain the faces of the crowd amongst which he pressed his way; he saw a great many good-looking and well-dressed young men, and a great flutter of feminine skirts, and such rows and rows of lovely faces, as it seems wonderful that this one city is at all seasons able to produce. But he saw no trace of the son he thought he might find dangling at some beauty's elbow, or lounging lazily with his fellow exquisites over the iron railings.

Presently, as he walked along slowly and with a certain strange curiosity and interest in the gay scene in which he found himself, some one behind him suddenly laid a hand upon his shoulder, and spoke his name.

"Great heavens, Sherwood! is this really you yourself? Who would have thought of seeing you, of all people in the world, doing the Park in June?"

The Squire found himself face to face with his brother-in-law, Lord Albert Vere, whom he had not spoken to since the lamentable day of his wife's funeral.

Lord Albert looked older, of course, as that event was now five-and-twenty years ago, but he was still spruce and smart and well turned out, with a beautifully-fitting frock-coat, and a pink carnation in his button-hole. He had a fine grey mous-

tache, waxed out at the ends, and his eyes were as bright and gay as ever, and he carried a dandy silver-mounted cane in his hand. He was a remarkable contrast to his seedy-looking old brother-in-law, with his stooping shoulders and country-made clothes, and the lack-lustre in his wistful eyes; and I suppose it may therefore be mentioned, much to Lord Albert's credit, that he was not at all ashamed to link his arm familiarly through that of his shabby-looking relative, and to carry him on with him in his walk.

"Come up for a little jaunt in town, have you? Quite right too! Why not? A man gets very rusty vegetating so long in the depths. Wonder you never came up to town before. We must brush you up a bit, William—show you a little life. Will you come and lunch with me? I'm just going back to the club."

The Squire, in his destitution, was only too pleased to accept the invitation.

Lord Albert bore him onwards, nodding right and left to his friends, taking his hat off with sweeping bows to many fair acquaintances, casting a word back at one, a smile at another, yet all the while keeping up a little undercurrent of conversation with his brother-in-law.

"Where are you stopping? Charing Cross Hotel? Oh, very decent place, I fancy! Cooking fair? But you won't dine there often. After lunch, I'm going to call on Donought; you'd better come along too. Four of those Idell girls still left unmarried. Donought can't get rid of them anyhow. He almost *offered* Imogene to me, but I told him I didn't approve of cousins marrying; besides, I'm a confirmed old bachelor, and never mean to put my head in the noose, not if I know it! By-the-way, William, were you on the lookout for me this morning? Is that what took you into the Park, where I saw you wandering about like a lost spirit from another world?"

"To tell you the truth, Albert," replied the Squire, who, now that they had turned out into the comparative peace of Piccadilly, felt more capable of getting a word in edgeways into the conversation of his voluble relative, "I was not exactly looking for you, although I am very glad to have met you. I went to Hyde Park to look for my son,—for Vere, your godson!"

"For Vere Sherwood!" cried the other, laughing. "Why, my dear fellow, Vere Sherwood is the hardest-worked man in London, I imagine. The Park is about the last place on earth you would be likely to find him."

"Albert, where can I find him?" asked the Squire eagerly. "I have lost sight of him entirely. You will surely be able to

tell me where he lives? I am growing old, and I want to make it up with the boy."

Albert Vere pursed up his lips, and lifted his eyebrows, and held his head to one side.

"Ah, it's a bad business about Vere, you know!" he said seriously and disapprovingly.

"A bad business!" faltered the father. "I thought—understood he was doing well?"

"Well, that is just it—he *is* doing well. He chucked us all over, and turned his back on his family, for a low, disreputable calling, which wasn't fit for a gentleman; but somehow, it seems the boy had talent, and has lifted himself out of the ruck, and managed to make a kind of a reputation for himself. So when I heard that he was getting on, and living respectably, I took the trouble to go to Donought and persuade him to speak to Lord Dalmaine about getting him a berth—a private secretaryship I thought would suit him—there happened to be one going—two hundred a year, a nice, easy, gentlemanlike position for, after all, he's my nephew and my godson, you know, and for poor dear Clorinda's sake I thought I ought to give him another chance. And then—would you believe it?—after I had pulled all the strings, and got everything in train with infinite trouble and bother—when I wrote to the young fool, and told him the family were willing to forgive and forget the past, and that if he would chuck up the folly of scribbling music and singing songs for his bread, I could get him a secretaryship and a competence, and introduce him into the best society as my nephew—what do you suppose the young blackguard had the impudence to write back to me?—'Dear Lord Albert,—I am obliged to you for your offer, which I decline with thanks. Such a position would not suit me, as I consider my present prospects infinitely superior, and my profession a more creditable one than the servility which you propose to me.' What do you say to that? I call it cheek, d—d cheek!"

"It was somewhat ungrateful," admitted the old man, a little doubtfully.

"Ungrateful, I should think it was! I call it infernal ingratitude! d—d ingratitude!"

"Still, I rather like his independence," remarked old Sherwood, after a second's pause.

"What! you stick up for him?" cried Lord Albert in astonishment.

"Well, you see, he's got wedded to that musical trash, you know; and, such as it is, he might not care to give it up."

"Who wants him to give it up? As an amusement be

might scribble and caterwaul to his heart's content, if he'd only do it for pleasure and not for money. Amateur music goes down very well in some sets, very well indeed !”

“Perhaps he finds it pays him better than what you offered him, Albert ?”

“Very likely, very likely !” replied the other, settling his chin irritably between the corners of his shirt collar. “Very likely ! A great many dirty trades do pay, no doubt, but are not, for all that, fit for gentlemen of good family ; and a gentleman thinks twice before he disgraces his birth. I dare say the young fool is making money—I don't doubt it—but at what a sacrifice !”

“What sacrifice ?” inquired the old man, very mildly indeed, but with a sort of glitter in his eye.

“What sacrifice ? why, the sacrifice of class and of his family !”

For half a second Squire Sherwood debated within himself whether, in view of that friendly lunch at the Carlton Club to which he was looking forward with much zest, he had not better be prudent, and hold his tongue, and swallow the affront to the son whom he himself had once discarded ; but something stronger than his desire for a good lunch came swelling and surging up within him, and refused to be silenced, either by prudence or by discretion, so that of a sudden he burst forth into a very tempest of words :—

“Well, I confess I fail to see either the sacrifice or the disgrace ! What has Vere's family done for him, I should like to know, that he should stop to consider them ? When he was poor and struggling, with all the world against him, did any one of his mother's people hold out a finger to help him ? And now that he has trusted to himself, and got on in his own way, and made his own career, and a name and money too, is it at all likely that he is going to trouble himself about any of you ? If he had not got on and done well, do you think you would have ever have thought of him again ? You know you wouldn't. He might have starved, and died in the gutter, and you wouldn't have lifted a finger to help him ! He doesn't want you now, and he is quite right, I say, to spurn your ill-timed offer of help as if it was an insult ! I am proud of Vere, very proud of him, and I think he was quite right !”

Lord Albert positively gasped, so great was his surprise at the unexpected attitude adopted by his brother-in-law.

He dropped his arm, and stuck his eyeglass into his eye, and fairly stood still to contemplate him.

“Good Lord !” he exclaimed ; “but you agreed with us all

at the time ! You were angrier than any of us ! You stopped his allowance, and shunted him altogether ! ”

“ So I did, so I did, and more shame to me for it ; and I’ve lived to see my mistake. I don’t like the boy’s crazy ‘ profession,’ as he calls it, any better than you do—I never did like it and never shall ; it’s a feather-brain, trashy sort of business at the best ; but he has stuck to it like a man, and I honour him for it, yes I do, from the very bottom of my heart ! and if I can find my son, I am going to ask him to forgive me, and be at peace with me again ; and that is what I’ve come up to London to do, that, and nothing else ! I will wish you good-morning, brother-in-law.”

“ Here, here ! stop man ! don’t go off like that ! ” cried Lord Albert, rushing after him, for the old man had gone off like an arrow from the bow. “ Don’t be in such a hurry, man ! Don’t get so angry ! I’m awfully sorry if I’ve offended you. Surely, William, you are coming to lunch with me ? ”

The Squire shook his head vigorously.

“ No, no ; not to-day, thanks. I’m not angry, not at all—but I am—rather agitated. I—I don’t often speak my mind—and now I’ve done it I—I don’t feel as if I could eat your bread, Albert—no not just this minute. You will excuse me. Good-bye, good-bye ! ”

And, lo and behold, he was gone ! and the discomfited scion of a noble and impeccable family stood alone upon the pavement, looking somewhat blankly after his retreating form.

“ Ah, well,” he said to himself, as he turned slowly away, and pursued the even tenor of his way down St James’s Street, “ they are an odd lot, those Sherwoods ! There’s a maggot in the brain of most of them, I fancy. Who would have thought the old boy would have cut up so rough ? Why, I always thought he was as mad as any of us against Vere ! Now he sticks up for him as if he was downright delighted with him. Ah, well, it’s a pity he got so angry—it’s upsetting to one’s liver to be raved at, especially so early in the day—but it has saved me standing him a lunch, and perhaps a bottle of fizz, which, the Lord knows, I could but ill afford ! ” And with a sigh of resignation Lord Albert turned into his club and ordered himself a modest “ cut off the joint,” and a pint of claret.

But if Squire Sherwood lost his lunch, and the prospective chances of a bottle of dry champagne, he found at least one thing which rewarded him infinitely and amply for his lamentable outburst of temper, and for the excellent meal which he had been obliged in consequence to forego. For, passing by

the doors of Princes Hall—which, had he gone to Pall Mall down St James's Street, would not at all have lain in his way—he saw upon a placard outside that his son was announced to sing there in a concert for the benefit of some charity that very afternoon.

In a concert-room Squire Sherwood was no doubt far more out of his element than he had been in Hyde Park ; indeed he had never, to his knowledge, been to a concert in his life before. Nevertheless, punctually at a quarter to three, he took possession of a stall some way down the room, looking about him with some timidity as he did so, coupled with a certain dogged determination of will which he calculated would see him through it. And when the time came for Vere to sing, and he beheld at last, through a mist of his own emotion, the son he had lost and had come to find ; when he heard the cheers that greeted his entrance, and the still more deafening plaudits which arose in a great shout after the last note of his song ; and when he heard in awestruck wonder that voice, strong yet mellow, swell and fall with passionate throbbings upon the utter silence of the vast crowd who hung enraptured upon its beauty, then Squire Sherwood, although he did not know one tune from another, nor understand one single fragment of the merits of what he heard, began nevertheless dimly to see and to understand that music is a great and wonderful thing ; that it wields a gigantic and altogether extraordinary power over the hearts and the souls of a very large section of mankind ; and that they to whom it is miraculously given to interpret that which is so glorious and so great, are not by any means the least, or the most to be despised, of those creatures which God has made to be a delight and a happiness to the generation amongst which their life is cast.

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN EVENING AT THE SERAPHIAN.

BUT although he hurried through the crowd as quickly as he could, the old man was too late to catch his son on the way out. He had already gone, whirled away in a hansom, to keep some other important engagement.

The box-keeper, to whom he addressed his inquiries, became quite sympathetic, so evident was the old gentleman's distress and disappointment.

"Can you not give me his private address?" he asked of the

friendly young man in his box-like desk. "I want to see him so very much—the fact is, I am his father."

"Dear me, sir, I'm very sorry, but if you apply at any of the large music shops in Bond Street, they'd be certain to tell you."

With this information Mr Sherwood was forced to be content, and after waiting about for a very long time in a large and handsomely-decorated musical emporium before any one would take the trouble to listen to him, after being hustled about from one impudent shopman to the other, stared at with ill-concealed contempt, and holloaed at with, "Now, Sir, what may your business be?" he did succeed at last in discovering the name of the humble street where Vere Sherwood lived, but was told at the same time that there was not the remotest chance of his finding him at home till the small hours of the morning.

Saddened and discouraged, the old man came away, and some sudden longing for a friendly greeting and a kindly word, made him, he knew not why, turn his steps in the direction of the Earl of Donought's house, in Portman Square.

It was now between six and seven o'clock in the evening, and he was informed by the magnificent beings in powder and plush who opened the door, that my lord was at home, and that the ladies had just come in from their drive.

He went upstairs, and found the august family assembled in the drawing-room.

Lord Donought was, after all, poor Lady Clorinda's uncle, and the ladies Idell were her first cousins, but he might as well have expected a warm welcome from the street lamp-posts, as have looked for anything like cordiality from these near relations of his late wife.

The Earl, who was tall and angular, put up an eye-glass at his entrance, and murmured an audible,—"*Who* did the fellow say?" to his eldest daughter, as the visitor's name was announced, and Mr Sherwood heard his name repeated somewhat loudly by the lady into her father's ear.

"Oh! Ah! Dear me! Sherwood? William Sherwood, is it? Why, bless my soul, I thought somebody told me last year you were dead. Suppose it was a mistake. How d'ye do, Sherwood; glad to see you," and two fingers were frigidly held out to him. "My dears, poor Clorinda Sherwood, you remember? *her* husband, you know!"

Lady Maria, who was fifty if she was a day, spoke a solemn "How do you do?" in a deep sepulchral voice; the Ladies Geraldine and Sophy inclined their heads in silence; whilst Imogene, the youngest, who was still skittish and juvenile in

her manners, being not much over thirty-five, gave a little affected wriggle, whilst with a smile she said,—

“May I give you a cup of tea?”

The tea-things stood by on a small Chippendale table; the Squire, who was thirsty and tired after the heat and the varied emotions of the afternoon, accepted the offer gladly, and presently a cup of stone cold and dark-hued fluid, which had been standing for over an hour, was put into his hands by one lady, and a crumb of stale seed cake handed to him by another. He gulped down the bitter nastiness with as good a face as he could, and declined the proffered food.

“Nice weather,” said the Earl, contemplating his finger nails.

“I suppose you’ve come up to see the Academy and the American Exhibition?” inquired Lady Maria politely.

“I’ve come up to see my son,” said the old man stoutly. “I know nothing about Academies and Exhibitions—they are not in my line; I’ve come to London to see my son Vere.”

Then cried out the ladies Sophy, Geraldine, and Imogene, all together in a breath, and in a perfect fever of excitement,—

“Oh, of course! Vere Sherwood is your son!”

“I heard him sing last night,” said Sophy.

“He is perfectly divine!” cried Imogene. “He sang, ‘Do you Remember,’ his own composition; it was *exquisite*!”

“It was at the Duchess of Wimpole’s musical party,” remarked Sophy.

Then Imogene, clasping her hands enthusiastically together, cried,—

“Oh, *do* you think you could bring him here, Mr Sherwood?”

“Ahem!” said the Earl, from his armchair. “My dears, do not be so impulsive. Mr Vere Sherwood has no doubt many pressing engagements, and besides—besides—well—I do not quite see.”

“Oh, yes, papa, dear!” here broke in the impetuous and gushing Imogene. “Of *course*, I mean that Mr Sherwood might bring him with him on the 15th, when we are going to have an evening party!” Turning to the old man in explanation,—“We want *so* much to have a little music—it helps off a party so well; and if he would sing, it would be sure to make it a success. Why shouldn’t he come with you, Mr Sherwood?”

“I do not see why,” replied the Squire mildly and innocently, being as yet wholly in the dark as to the meaning and intention of his fair cousins’ proposition. “Certainly if Verè could go to the Duchess of Wimpole’s house, there is no good reason why he should not go to his mother’s uncle’s house,—no reason at all, that I can see!”

But here Lady Maria, who had a head on her shoulders, and a sharp eye to the main chance, thought it time to interfere.

"Oh, that was a different thing altogether, Mr Sherwood! The dear Duchess, of course, can afford to engage the best professionals for her entertainments, which are on a grand scale. Now our little receptions are *quite* friendly, and what my sisters mean is—"

"Is that Mr Vere Sherwood should come as a *friend*, you know," put in Imogene; "as he is a relation, he might come with you as a *friend* I meant."

Then the Squire understood the meanness and the paltriness of the trick these fine ladies sought to play upon him. He rose rather suddenly to his feet.

"I do not see quite how that could be, Lady Imogene. My son is not your friend, nor have you ever treated him as a relation. How is it possible then that he should do you a favour in return for the unfriendliness of years?" Just then the dressing-bell rang, and Mr Sherwood held out his hand to say good-bye. The Earl did not ask him to stop and dine, but merely remarked once more, as he extended his forefingers again, that the weather was delightful.

Lady Maria and Lady Sophy murmured good-evening; Lady Geraldine made him a sort of curtsy, and rang the bell; whilst Lady Imogene hid a very mortified and angry face behind the clatter of the tea-cups.

So the Squire shook the dust off his feet and went away, feeling very sorry that he had troubled his fine relatives, and very determined to trouble them no more.

But there was a battle-royal waged amongst these illustrious persons after the old man was gone.

"You shouldn't have said it, Imogene!" said Lady Maria angrily. "Why mention our party at all?"

"But only think how splendid it would have been if we could have got him here to sing on the 15th," pleaded the luckless damsel.

"The old donkey ought to have been flattered at our asking him to come to the house. I should have thought he would have jumped at such a chance," said Sophy.

"I am sure we praised up his son's singing enough!" pouted Geraldine.

"It was very injudicious to mention him at all," said Maria.

"It was very bad taste," supplemented the Earl, and at this crushing condemnation the two younger sisters, who still affected the frailties of early girlhood, dissolved into tears.

"After our long neglect of him, it was of course preposterous to

ask him to bring the young man and offer him no remuneration—and I cannot, of course, afford the high terms these sort of persons expect,” continued her father, with grave displeasure.

“And, after all,” added Lady Maria, “really an old frump like that is no addition—I don’t know what we should have done with him on the 15th; and the young man, who must, of course, be a very inferior individual—would have certainly gone about boasting of his being related to us, and talking of us as his cousins. It would have been very awkward indeed, and very unpleasant.”

“Poor and discreditable relations are a severe trial to respectable families, and must at all risks be kept at a distance,” said Lord Donought sententiously; “let me hear no more about these people.”

And then the august family all filed upstairs to dress for dinner, and the Sherwoods were mentioned no more.

What the Squire did after he had eaten a frugal dinner in the coffee-room of his hotel, was to go and sit in his son’s rooms, in a melancholy little back street in Bloomsbury, in order to wait for his return.

He had some trouble in obtaining leave to stop there, for the landlady at first looked him over with suspicion, and seemed unwilling to give credence to his story. Fortunately, however, he had his card with him, and becoming at length persuaded that the old gentleman in the shabby country clothes was really what he professed to be, and not a burglar or an assassin, she ushered him upstairs, turned up the gas, and offered him refreshment, in the shape of spirits and water, which he declined.

Left by himself, the old man looked with a natural curiosity around the small and mean apartment. There were no signs of luxury or self-indulgence in the barely-furnished little room. Still less was there any evidence—which he had more than half expected to find—of a life of discreditable dissipation. Piles of music lay heaped up on chairs and cabinet; a large writing-table, littered over with musical manuscript; and one luxury, a very fine semi-grand Broadwood piano, occupying one whole side of the room. It was evidently a room devoted to hard work. There were no cigar boxes lying about, no French novels, no photographs of dancers, or of ladies of doubtful character;—no photographs at all, in fact, save two upon the mantelpiece in frames. He went up to examine them. One represented a very beautiful young woman with large dark eyes, and a refined and pensive face, and the other was himself. A blackened briarwood pipe and a small carriage clock were the only other ornaments upon the mantelshelf.

Mr Sherwood sat down in the only arm-chair in the room, and waited; and whilst he waited he thought a great deal. All his dealings towards his son came back in review before his eyes, and he began to see plainly many things which had hitherto remained hidden from him. For the first time he perceived that he had been very much to blame in his treatment of Vere,—that he who should have stood by him, and helped him, had been the first to disown him and cast him off; that he had withdrawn not only his affection, but also the very means of sustenance from him, so that, but for some miraculous causes, of which he was in ignorance, his poor Clorinda's boy must assuredly have starved. Nine young fellows out of ten in such a plight would have taken to drink, and other evil courses, and have terminated a career of wickedness in utter degradation and misery. Instead of which, Vere had apparently risen above his fate; he had struggled on, alone and unaided, trusting to his own efforts and to his own talents to keep his head above water, and to make good his footing in this hard and pitiless world which had turned its back upon him so cruelly.

And how nobly he must have fought, and how gloriously he had succeeded! What a fine fellow he must be! How strong and self-reliant, and how right he had been to stick to the career for which his genius had fitted him, in opposition to short-sighted, mean-natured persons, such as Albert Vere and the Earl of Donought—and himself.

Ah, yes, there was the sting of it all! If it had been only those aristocratic idiots who had persecuted and howled him out of their ranks! But he himself had joined in the hue and cry, and had reviled and rejected his own flesh and blood with his stupid and narrow-minded pig-headedness. He had been wrong, utterly wrong all through—whilst Vere had been right.

And the more he thought of it, the more certain he felt that Vere would never forgive him! Why indeed should he? He did not require a father's love and assistance now; he had learnt to do without them, just as he had learnt to be independent of his mother's fine relations. He had his own position, his own friends, his own security of success—what did he want with the poor ignorant old father who had treated him so badly?

And the Squire felt quite sure that Vere would not relent to him. He almost wished he had never come, almost felt inclined to go away silently and leave no trace that he had ever sought him. As he sat on alone in the night through the whole of one silent hour, broken only by the occasional wheels of a passing vehicle, he became more and more nervous, and

more and more uneasy as to what sort of reception he should get from the son he had treated so badly.

When at length a cab stopped outside, and the street door banged to noisily, and rapid steps came hurrying up the staircase, the poor old gentleman's heart beat so violently, and he trembled so much, that all the speeches he had prepared to make to his son went clean out of his head.

The door burst open. Seven years ago Vere had been a slender stripling, tall but unformed, shambling in gait, and awkward and shy in manner. The young man who came in now was broad-shouldered and well set up. There was the ring of assurance in his very footstep, and that straight level glance in his fearless eyes which a wholesome pride, and habits of self-reliance, and that strong sense of the value of himself, and his place in the world, engender naturally in any man who has struggled and succeeded in the battle of life.

He was a handsome fellow too, not with any special beauty of feature, or any picturesqueness of figure or garb, but with those good looks which are the heritage of every well-grown healthy young Englishman whose heart is guileless and whose hands are clean. He had the clear and honest eye that is not afraid to face any man, the ready smile that brightens even irregular features into beauty, and that robust and healthy colour which betokens a good digestion, and habits of temperance in all things.

He stopped short when he came in, and a flush half of surprise and half of pleasure, flooded his face.

The Squire had risen from his chair, and held out both his hands; they were thin old hands, and they trembled as he stretched them out. The gas-light shone on his grey head, and there was both pathos and emotion in the drawn and wrinkled features. He could not make any speeches at all—they all went out of his head—only with a sort of voiceless sob came one word from his shaking lips—"Vere!"

The roll of music under Vere's arm fell to the ground, as with a bound the young man sprang forward and grasped his hands.

"My dear, dear father! this is good indeed! How delighted I am to see you—how good of you to come!"

And as he wrung the two old hands in his, and patted the bent back with loving tenderness, his whole face was illumined with absolute joy and unutterable affection.

"Vere, can you forgive me?" said the old man brokenly.

"Forgive! Stuff and nonsense! why there's nothing to forgive. I am so glad to see you! How long have you been here? Why did you not let me know? I could have been back half

an hour earlier. Where are you staying? And, good heavens, have you had any dinner?" and Vere's hand was on the bell.

"My dear boy, I dined hours ago."

"Yes! Oh, then, you'll be quite ready for supper, and I can tell you I am! I only just looked in to get some music, and I am going off to the Seraphian; and you shall come with me, father. I kept my hansom: we will be off at once."

There is no doubt about it that could all his respectable and worthy neighbours in Westshire have been miraculously permitted to see Squire Sherwood that night, they would have been very much surprised and scandalised.

Only fancy the horror and dismay of those worthy personages the Doctor and the Rector, and the retired Grammar School Head-master, to say nothing of old Mary, the housemaid, and many steady-going and humdrum country acquaintances, could they have beheld their respectable friend and neighbour with a brandy-and-soda at his side, and a dish of grilled and devilled bones before him, surrounded by the members of the most Bohemian night club in all London.

Truth to tell, he was somewhat bewildered at his own position, and yet he certainly enjoyed himself very much indeed. It was, in fact, the most memorable evening of his whole life. When he and Vere came in, the room was full, and their entrance was hailed with such shouts of acclamation and delight, such a volley of chaff and laughter, as proved at once that Vere was a universal favourite. And so he was, for at the Seraphian, more than anywhere, his great talent was thoroughly appreciated and done justice to, and his simple manly character had won its way by the sheer force of its own goodness.

They don't care at all at the Seraphian whether you are rich or well-connected,—who are your family, or what is your standing in the world of fashion and influence. They do not value a man in the very least for what he *has*, but solely and entirely for what he *is*. That is the grand test of popularity and of position amongst the light-hearted Seraphianites.

Vere was a great man amongst them—he held a well-deserved place amongst many others who were conspicuous for talent in the working world. Men of letters, actors, musicians, poets—all assembled there upon the broad basis of mutual goodwill and mutual sympathy. Severer critics could not perhaps be found—for they knew what was good and dejected what was false; but at the same time there was no stint to the generosity and enthusiasm of the praise that was justly awarded to those of their number who excelled.

And Vere's genius had always been recognised here, long before the world without had become awake to its greatness.

As he walked up the crowded room, followed by the old gentleman with the bald head and thin fringe of white hair, many hands were stretched forth to give him a passing touch, many smiling eyes shone with pleasure at his arrival, whilst almost every tongue in the room spoke his name with joyful greetings.

"Gentlemen," said Vere, when he reached the top of the room, and took the vacant place at a table which had been reserved for him, "gentlemen, you are quite right, I am very late to-night, and I should be very much ashamed of myself—"

"Hear, hear! Vere's ashamed of himself!" shouted a dozen laughing voices.

"I said I should be—not I am. I should be if I had not two powerful excuses to offer."

"No excuse needed."

"My first excuse is that I couldn't get here sooner"—this witticism was received with very great applause indeed,—“and my second is, that I wanted to bring to you my father, whom I have not seen for some time, and who has done me the honour to come to London to pay me a visit. Gentlemen, allow me to introduce to you my father.”

The Squire never forgot the way then, that all Vere's friends crowded round to shake him by the hand, and to express their pleasure at making his acquaintance.

They were gentle and considerate with him too, laying aside all their somewhat broad chaff and noisy jokes, and treating him with such true courtesy that he became quite at his ease amongst them. They seemed to adopt him as one of themselves, and, for Vere's sake, he became an honoured and important guest at once. The old gentleman heard so many new and interesting things, and was told so large a number of amusing anecdotes and stories that night, that he had never spent an evening so agreeably, or been so thoroughly well amused in his life before.

He listened, also, to a great deal of very good music, interspersed with some capital recitations, both comic and pathetic; he laughed very heartily at some, whilst he was so moved by others that he had to wipe his glasses very carefully, and blow his nose very frequently, lest he should be betrayed into actual tears.

He heard his son sing again too, and was induced to own to him, not without a little shamefacedness, that it was for the second time that day, for that he had been amongst the crowd

in Princes Hall in the afternoon ; a confession which seemed chiefly to distress Vere that his father should be out of pocket by the price of a stall, which he could have secured for him for nothing.

Altogether it was a wonderful evening, like no other that he had ever spent in his life before, and when at last, in the grey dawn of a summer morning, he wished his boy good-night at the door of his hotel, he could not help telling him the thought that had been uppermost in his mind for the last three hours.

"I like your friends, Vere—they are nice fellows—they have been very good to an old man. I like them better, I think, than Lord Donought and his daughters—they were not nice to me, not at all. Your friends have given me so many kind invitations, and promised me so many tickets for theatres and concerts, that if I went to them all I should not have a dull hour for the rest of the time I am in London. But your poor mother's uncle did not even ask me to stop and dine with him, though the half-hour bell was ringing as I wished him good-bye. Yes, Vere, I like your Seraphian friends much better than I like Lord Donought."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

No doubt Blanche Millbanke had been perfectly right when she had said that her friend was in no danger from the too assiduous attentions of Lord Dalmaine, and it was equally certain that the astute lady was not mistaken in her fears concerning the quarter where the real danger lay.

Elizabeth's very unconsciousness constituted her peril. On that particular evening when Marcus Cunningham had at length presented himself in her drawing-room, the absolute commonplaceness of their meeting had served to disarm it from half the apprehensions with which she had wondered and conjectured concerning it.

Is it not always so in life? The encounter which we have dreaded so much passes off simply and naturally. The supreme crisis of our lives comes upon us unexpectedly, and leaves us so calm and untroubled, that we can scarcely realise that what we feared so much has actually taken place, and that no such convulsion of our existence as we anticipated has been the inevitable result.

At the precise moment when Marcus Cunningham entered her house, Elizabeth happened to be surrounded by a small crowd of persons who were engaging her attention with more than usual pertinacity. Lord Dalmaine was in the act of introducing to her a foreign ambassador, whom he had brought to her house with him, and three or four other persons of more or less distinction were waiting to speak to her, as soon as she should be at liberty to attend to them. Then across the shoulders of this little group she suddenly perceived the tall form and Byronic head of the man of her maiden fancy, enter through the open doorway. She stretched out a hand to him over the Ambassador's back—he was a short, fat man, with a great many stars and orders—and her fingers had scarcely touched Marcus's hand, and her eyes had not even met his glance, before the clamouring voices about her forced her to look away again from the face which had once been so dear to her.

At that moment, Blanche—whether by chance or on purpose, it is, perhaps, irrelevant to conjecture—had come hurriedly to her side with a whisper of importance.

“Madame Zerlini says she will sing, Elizabeth. You had better come and speak to her at once; she is in the next room. You may consider yourself honoured, I can tell you!—she does not often volunteer to treat the world!”

Elizabeth hurried away from the centre drawing-room into the smaller room, with a domed and gilded ceiling, that was consecrated to music. The generous offer of the great contralto singer was not a thing to be lightly regarded, and a properly grateful hostess had no other choice but to remain within ten yards of the piano whilst the splendid notes of the world-famed voice rang out with unaltered magnificence upon the delighted ears of the suddenly hushed crowd.

When it was over—when the song was at an end, and the applause had died away—and when Lady Ingram, pressing Madame Zerlini's hands, had delivered herself of one of those appropriate little speeches which no one knew better than herself how to make graceful and to the point—then, as far as Marcus Cunningham went, it was too late!

On regaining the larger rooms, she could just see his back far away at a distant door-way; he was talking to some man, who was apparently detaining him by the button-hole, somewhat against his inclination. She saw that he listened impatiently, and presently he gave a rapid look round the room, failed to perceive herself, and bolted suddenly out on to the staircase. She saw him no more; and doubtless he went away then and there.

Elizabeth went to bed that night with that sick sensation of disappointment which is due to the soreness of an aching heart, but which she set down—with an obstinacy born of her own fixed resolve not to open her eyes to the truth—to anger and annoyance at what she chose to consider the rudeness and incivility of her guest in not making another effort to speak to her.

As for Lady Arthur, who had been utterly dismayed at the sight of him, she went home congratulating herself upon her own cleverness and promptitude, and chuckled gaily to herself over the speedy rout of the element of danger and disturbance. "I do hope he will not come again," she said to herself; but her hopes were destined to be frustrated, and the next time Marcus Cunningham came to Upper Belgrave Street, things turned out very differently indeed. It was the Sunday after that dinner in Brook Street at which Lady Arthur had volunteered to give him sundry doses of advice, by which he had neither the inclination nor the power to profit, and Cunningham came on this second occasion no longer because he wanted to see for himself how things were with his quondam love, but because the Brabberstones brought him with them, and that he had no alternative, or told himself he had none, but to accompany the lady of his affections whithersoever she chose.

Marcus was quite sure indeed that he had far rather have kept away—he had been jealously angry a week ago to find that rumour had only spoken too truly, and that the dangerous and talented Lord Dalmaine was indeed an absolute fixture at Lady Ingram's elbow; and he told himself that he would infinitely prefer not to be pained and troubled again by so unwelcome a spectacle. And yet, at the bottom of his heart he knew that he was glad that he had no choice in the matter, and was obliged to go. Like the moth of the fable, he had an irresistible longing to flutter around the flame that might possibly destroy him, and he knew that the very failure of his first visit had but strengthened his determination to come near her again.

On this occasion neither the propinquity of Dalmaine the ever present, nor the claims of distinguished foreigners, nor yet the siren voice of one of the great singers of the world, had the power to sweep her out of his reach. Impossible that she could ignore the entrance of such important persons, and at the same time such old friends as were Lord and Lady Brabberstone and her daughter.

They surrounded her immediately, even driving back to a respectful distance the portly form of her constant admirer; and with them—a part indeed of the family—Mr Cunningham was naturally included.

Elizabeth had never looked more lovely. A pale rose-flushed dress, cunningly blended with dark green velvet, set off the youth and brilliancy of her eyes and complexion; and the glitter of the family diamonds in her hair and round her smooth white throat, enhanced, as gems of great value undoubtedly do—in spite of the assurances of the poets to the contrary—all the natural charms of a fresh and unspoilt beauty.

Elizabeth looked like a moss-rose glittering in dewdrops. It was her husband's simile for her, and he was so struck with her appearance that he had promised himself to sit up later than usual to-night, in order to contemplate his pretty wife in her finery.

Lady Arthur was very glad he was there when the Brabberstone party came in. There was thunder in the air to-night; she could not tell why nor wherefore, but she dreaded something, she knew not what. It seemed as though so many clashing elements gathered together in one room could not fail to bring about some catastrophe. There was, in fact, had Lady Arthur only known it, a still further discordance in store for that memorable evening, which was, curiously enough, destined to be the last of those brilliant Sunday reunions which her own talent and ingenuity had so largely assisted in establishing upon a firm basis in the world of life and fashion.

Her old friends greeted Elizabeth in the manner peculiar to each. Lord Brabberstone congratulated her kindly upon her improved appearance and success in society, whilst his wife drew comparisons, more true than well-timed, betwixt her own singular good fortune and her mother's unfortunate second marriage.

"Your poor mother, Elizabeth, how she has destroyed herself! Of course, we really cannot associate with that insufferable man. We have been obliged to cut off all intercourse with the Lodge—one must draw the line somewhere; and really I hear he leads the poor woman the life of a dog, and that she looks very ill, and ten years older already."

This kind of speech concerning one's own mother, spoken in a loud voice, in a mixed company of smart and well-bred Londoners, is apt to make even the most hardened nature feel intensely uncomfortable. Elizabeth did not like it to be published to her guests that Lady Brabberstone had dropped her mother's acquaintance, and that her stepfather was an unsupportable man. She thought Lady Brabberstone's speech an evidence of want of tact, whereas, as a matter of fact, it was more—it was one of those small barbed arrows, dipped in venom, of which her ladyship had a score in reserve to punish the woman who had slighted her son.

Elizabeth got rather hot and angry.

"It would have been kinder of you, I think, to have gone to see my mother, since you heard that she was ill."

She would perhaps have said yet more, but Rachel whispered to her that she had been to see Mrs Fairgrave, and found her very much as she always had been.

"Ah, dear Rachel," cried Elizabeth, turning gratefully to the friend who had been her type and model of perfect womanhood in the girlish days that were gone, "I am glad indeed to see you again, and to congratulate you on your engagement—and Mr Cunningham too! With all my heart I wish you both happiness!"

Elizabeth spoke very impulsively: a warm glow of affection filled her heart, whilst the dew of a genuine emotion moistened her lovely eyes. She grasped a hand of each in her eager little fingers, and at that moment she felt indeed that for Rachel's sake she forgave the past to the man she had once loved. It was perhaps the best and truest feeling that had come to her for many months. All her resentment and bitterness, all her craving for a mean revenge, all the gnawing pain of a love that has been scorned and of a heart that has been rebuffed, died out of her, and, in the warm glow of Rachel's sweet and gracious kindness, Elizabeth became once more her better self, and her heart cried aloud within her, "Since he is happy, then let me be generous, and forgive him!"

But if her congratulations not only gave pleasure to Rachel, but also redounded to the credit of her own nature, they had, on the other hand, anything but a softening and purifying effect upon the man who was included in her good wishes.

Marcus was lashed into a positive fury by her words. That she, who for one brief summer week had been his own,—who had told her love to him,—lain upon his breast,—upon whose lips the breath of his passionate kiss had awakened the woman out of the maiden—that she should have forgotten all this,—forgotten and forgiven, apparently,—recovered from the blow he had dealt her, and should be now sweetly wishing him happiness with another!—all this was absolutely maddening to him.

He would sooner have encountered any amount of scorn and anger,—sooner have been met with curses and reproaches, than with these cruelly cold blessings and good wishes. Then he would have known that he had still the power to touch her; now, it only seemed to him that he had become utterly indifferent to her.

And to that position a man's vanity can never endure to be degraded.

He realised all at once that although apparently he had lost all hold over her, yet he himself was capable of the keenest suffering on her account. Beyond a question, indeed, had he met her again as little Elizabeth Bertram,—an unknown and insignificant country-bred child, he would have felt nothing of all this. Her face would have failed to touch him, and her voice would have aroused within him no warmer sentiment than a vague regret, or at most a tender compassion.

But as he saw her now, the centre and mistress of a brilliant society, surrounded by the flattery and the admiration of the best born and the cleverest of the world, whose favourable verdict invests its favourites with so high a value, she became at once the most important thing in the whole world to him.

Her beauty exasperated him—her coldness and apparent forgetfulness of him drove him out of his nicely-balanced and prudently-arranged identity, into that other second nature which underlay all the veneer of his father's training, and which was strong and passionate and unreasoning. A madness seemed to possess him. In that moment when Elizabeth's small gloved hand lay upon his palm—when the tremulous words of congratulation fluttered upon her lips, he felt as if he could have crushed her to his heart, and claimed her as his love then and there before the whole world,—he could have cried aloud in his frenzy,—“Stand back! She is mine, my own,—the woman whom I loved once—whom I love still—for whom I could lose myself for ever and ever!”

The words were in his heart, the insensate longing filled his brain, and surged in great throbbing pulsations throughout his whole being. But he only bowed low over her hand, murmured some inaudible words of thanks, and turned very pale; and no one in all the gay crowd guessed at the passion which raged within him.

Then he stood back and watched her. Watched her moving rapidly amongst her guests, welcoming new-comers, and with pleasant words and smiles to all. He saw how the cleverest men in the room gravitated as by an irresistible attraction to where she stood, and ground his teeth in anguish over his own folly and stupidity in having thrown away this prize that once was so nearly his own.

He could compare the two women now,—his Rachel, who was always the same, always handsome and striking-looking, who was clever too, with that solid cleverness which a good education and a grave way of looking at life gives naturally to a superior-natured woman. But she lacked the bright radiance, the easy versatility, of the other. She had not the same delight-

ful charm of manner, nor the same happy faculty of pleasing every one.

He stood leaning against the wall, with folded arms, and looked at her. He could not indeed take his eyes from off her: not a movement of her head, not a change of her face, not a trick of her manner, was lost upon him. He took in every detail of her dress, and the effect of every diamond that glittered upon her hair and bosom. He listened eagerly to her laugh, and the very play of the pink ostrich fan against her cheek or neck filled him with a rapture of admiration.

She maddened him above all because he had lost her, and that she was beyond his reach.

When he saw Lord Dalmaine, who for certain was watching her too, and with far less tragic sensations, approach her and claim her attention as of custom and almost of right, he was filled with a passion of hatred and jealousy towards that dignified and talented statesman which no doubt would have surprised him excessively could they have been revealed to him.

He was angry, too, when from his vantage-point he perceived Sir James slip out of the room unnoticed, and sneak away unperceived up the broad staircase to his bedroom.

"At least he might stay to protect his wife by his presence," he said to himself, with a wholly unreasonable anger; and then he tried to account for all these horrible and tumultuous sensations, which caused him so much agony, by setting them down to a friendly regard for the safety and good name of a woman who had once been dear to him.

Elizabeth knew that he was watching her. The perception of his interest was a sudden revelation to her. Not once did her eyes stray towards him, not by one gesture did she betray her consciousness; but she knew it all the same, and all her good impulses, and the little exaltation which had made her wish him happiness with Rachel, were straightway at an end.

The fever of an unknown excitement lent itself unconsciously to her words and to her movements; she knew that she had never talked so well, never made herself so charmingly popular, never indeed flirted with so much enthusiasm with the impressionable Dalmaine before.

It was the hour of her triumph and of her greatest danger. She said to herself,—*"I can make him feel then, after all! In spite of Rachel, in spite of the gulf between to-day and the past, he is not indifferent to me!"*

"This must indeed be revenge!" she said presently again in her heart, the heart that was beating so hard that it made her words a little breathless, the words that she was speaking to Dalmaine.

"I can get you into the Speaker's Gallery on Thursday," he was saying. "Let me take charge of you for the evening. I will meet you at the door of the Ladies' Gallery at nine. It will be a great night; there will be some good speeches—"

"I don't know if Jim would like me to go, unless I might take Blanche Millbanke," she said doubtfully, with that silent figure against the wall always in the foreground of her thoughts.

"No, no!—we don't want her! I mean," catching himself up; "I cannot get more than one lady in, I am sure, there is such a rush for the places for Thursday. I will look after you. We will have a little supper in one of the Committee Rooms. Don't look scared! only a cup of tea and a poached egg. It will be a delightful night, and you will enjoy it so much—"

Still she hesitated, looking down at her fan, opening and shutting it softly, the great curled ostrich feathers rustling softly in her hands against one another. There is a luxurious aroma about an ostrich feather fan, a balmy suggestion of dreamy love, a breath as of a forbidden delight.

Dalmaine was bending low over her. He was a clever man, he was almost a great man, but he was by no means a good man.

"Do come!" he murmured. "How am I to tempt you? Let me have the pleasure for once of taking charge of you. I will be so discreet and so careful. You will be so much interested."

She felt Marcus Cunningham's eyes upon her—it was an instinct. She knew that she was making him jealous,—that she was giving him pain.

She lifted her face to Dalmaine's with a sudden impulse of a wicked coquetry. She smiled at him.

"You do not enumerate too many temptations!" she said to him laughingly. "A cup of tea—a poached egg—and—and—your discretion! Can I not get all that at home?"

"But the debate—you who care about politics—will you not care about the debate?—a battle-royal over the Agricultural Labourer!"

"How seraphic!" murmured Elizabeth sarcastically. "I have met him you know," she added, whilst a sudden wave of bitter memories swept in a flood across her, and she seemed to feel the burning eyes fixed upon her with every fibre of her being. "Oh, yes, I have met him—the Agricultural Labourer I mean—at very close quarters too! He is delightful—he is interesting—oh, very interesting, especially when he tramples upon you—he is charming! Tempt me better than that, Lord Dalmaine!"

The statesman looked at her uncertainly. What a bewitching, puzzling creature was this lovely little woman, with her mocking eyes and her flashing smile. She bewildered him rather—he could not make her out.

"I do not understand you," he said. "You are perhaps laughing at me. I do not like to be laughed at. I can only say," he added, with the curiously easily offended vanity of an important person who does not desire to be taken too lightly, even by a pretty woman, "that for my part I can see nothing to laugh at. The question is a burning one. Goschen and Chaplin are to speak upon it; Bright is expected to say something; and Marcus Cunningham—the most promising of all the new members of the late election—is to make a speech upon it."

She looked up suddenly. A curious light was in her eyes. It took her a few seconds to command her voice and to hide her excitement.

"I think I will come," she said at length. "It is that supper, you know," with a half-nervous laugh, "that supper of tea and poached eggs, that tempts me! It has almost an agricultural flavour, has it not? Yes, I will come—it will be quite charming, I know."

And Dalmaine, meeting her uplifted eyes with the concentration of a profound interest in his own, answered her by no spoken words, but only by a strangely-significant expression, which made her for a moment half-draw back—partly from fear, and partly from shame—from the revelation of that which some men can always look with a better grace than they can dare to speak.

To himself the man who was used to success with women said triumphantly,—

"Then she does love me after all! and this woman, with her wit and her candour, is no better and no harder to get over than all the rest."

CHAPTER XXV.

COMPARING NOTES.

"CAN you not give me one word?"

"A dozen, if you like!"

It was much later on, in an angle of the supper-room. The rooms were thinning rapidly, the crowd of guests was gone or going, and only a pleasant number remained, scattered in

couples and groups about the large rooms, and upon the broad staircase.

Elizabeth for the first time had found her way downstairs to the dining-room.

She turned round lightly; Marcus was standing behind her with pleading eyes. She was quite cool now; her heart had regained its normal quietude; her eyes did not falter before his; there was even a half-defiant audacity in their steady glance. They seemed to say to him, "Let your words be of to-day—leave the past alone!"

How changed she was since that summer afternoon upon the lawn, when her face had sunk like a drooping rose before him, and her timid eyes seemed scarcely able to uplift themselves at his bidding!

It seemed almost as though this beautiful woman of the world could be in no way connected with that other tender trembling girl who had once loved him. Oh, that he might summon again the love-light to her violet-tinted eyes,—that for one moment only he might bring back that sweet evanescent past, which he had valued so little, and cast away so readily! He motioned her to a low couch behind them, and they sat down together.

"It is the first time I have sat down the whole evening!" she cried, sinking down against the cushions with a sigh of relief. "One gets very tired standing."

He looked at her curiously.

"You like this kind of thing, then? You enjoy entertaining? It is difficult to me to recognise you as you were; you seem so thoroughly at home in this new life!"

"Oh, I love it!" she cried enthusiastically. "I think this never-ending whirl of London is the only life worth living! I could not exist without society now!"

"And yet it was but your first dance, and your first dinner-party, was it not, when I met you at Brabberstone last summer? And it is but a year ago! You were such a child, so young, so—"

"Young and extremely foolish, Mr Cunningham!" she broke in hurriedly. "*Exceedingly* foolish!" she repeated, with emphasis.

"You were exceedingly sweet, Elizabeth!" he murmured tenderly.

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"I have forgotten all those days," she said, shortly and coldly.

"Have you forgiven me? Can you ever forgive me?" he said, almost in a whisper, bending low towards her.

She shrugged her shoulders carelessly, and closed the pink feathers of her fan sharply together.

"Naturally. Does one not always forgive, even as one forgets, these little trivial errors of one's calf-days, in oneself as well as in others?"

The absolute indifference of the words, and the supreme unconcern of her whole manner and face, galled him horribly. But perhaps she overdid it a little. She was so determined not to give him one shred or one hair's-breadth whereupon he might construct any theories as to her real feelings, that it is possible that she over-acted her part.

Man is a curious and complex animal, and the contradictions of his being are such as few women have the wit to fathom. Marcus was one of those men who never value that which comes to them easily. To such a man, possession renders an object worthless, and it is only in the keen desire for unattainable impossibilities that the strength of his nature can be fully developed. Elizabeth Bertram, had he met her again pale and sad-eyed, with reproach in her glances and the woe of a broken heart written upon her drooping face, would have utterly failed either to touch him or to arouse in him one spark of the love which she had once wrung from him so unwillingly. But Lady Ingram—beautiful and happy, with the radiance of success upon her brow, and defiance and contempt in her proud and indifferent eyes—awoke in him all, ten times more than all, the old love once more. Now that she was beyond his reach,—no longer free to be wooed,—no longer willing to be courted, there awoke within him all at once the fierce flame of a deeper and stronger passion than had ever assailed him in the whole course of his orderly and well-arranged existence before.

He loved her, as he had not loved her in the weak and pitiful past, as he did not, never would, love the Rachel who was to be his wife; and, stranger and more wonderful still, as he did not even love either himself or his own earthly ambitions.

All this, as he sat beside her, became revealed to him with an irresistible force.

"Do not, I entreat you, be cruel and hard to me," he pleaded.

It was he who was now the suppliant. How changed indeed were the old relations between them.

She laughed lightly.

"Cruel! Hard! Dear me, what terrible things to accuse me of! Are we not the best of friends, Mr Cunningham? Have I not wished you every sort of happiness,—told you how glad

I am to see you again?—made all sorts of pretty speeches to you?”

“Oh, yes; your words are polite enough,” he answered bitterly,—“very polite and very sugary. But you know very well that that is not what I mean. You know that there is anger in your cold hard eyes, and in the very ring of your voice. A year ago, Elizabeth, those eyes, that are now so pitiless, used to melt into tenderness under mine, and your voice was soft and tremulous. A year ago—”

“A year ago, Mr Cunningham, I was a silly girl, who had read a few love songs, and a few pretty novels, and who foolishly fancied that life was destined to be formed upon their model. I was ignorant in those days, ignorant even of the first principles of duty and of success. I did not understand, as I do now, that men and women must consider themselves, and their advancement in the world, before everything,—that they have no right to throw themselves away stupidly, or to give trouble to their friends, by making unsatisfactory marriages. I soon came to my senses, you see, and did what was wise and right myself; and see how perfectly happy I am—the happiest woman in all London, I think! And you too, you have chosen the better path, which you know we are all told to do in this dear world of ours, and everyone is pleased at your engagement. You have made your excellent father so happy, I am told, and all the Brabberstones. Rachel is so well suited to you,—a wife whom Fortune herself seemed to have destined for you. You had chosen her even then,—were almost pledged to her; she was even then the one woman you had selected out of all others to fill the honoured place of your wife.” A look of blank amazement crossed his face. She went on rapidly. “I am not mistaken, because it was Lady Brabberstone herself who told me so: you had been attached to Rachel for years, she said! But perhaps there was no great harm in that foolish little flirtation, which had amused us both so much—oh, yes! it amused me too—I do not mind confessing it!—and if it was sadly imprudent on your part, at all events it served to distract your mind from all the turmoil and hard work of your canvassing and election. And it was really very amusing, was it not? but it is quite quite dead now, so why not let the ashes lie?”

Something in his face stopped her. As the scornful words died away upon her lips, she saw that a new thing had come to him.

“Lady Brabberstone?—Lady Brabberstone?” he repeated—“Lady Brabberstone told you that I cared for Rachel,—*then*,—at the time of the election,—after that meeting at Hamerton, you mean?”

"Undoubtedly she did."

"Then it was Lady Brabberstone who came between us!" he cried, with conviction.

Elizabeth looked troubled. The hard angry light went slowly out of her eyes, and the shadow of a great fear swept over her face, leaving her pale and a little breathless.

Was it possible that it was no mere selfish and cruel deceit,—not simply a wanton disregard of her love, but some other cause, unknown and unsuspected even until now, that had divided them? Had she wronged him and misjudged him all along, and, instead of being false to her, had some third person, with diabolical malice, come between them, and thrust them apart into a nightmare of misrepresentation and misunderstanding?

"Tell me, I entreat of you, what you mean?" she said, trembling with a horrible apprehension.

"I can see it all now," he answered, gloomily and bitterly. "It is true that my father and her parents wished it,—had wished it for long, but not true that I had ever spoken to Rachel herself, or that I was in any way bound to her. She was nothing to me, absolutely nothing. It was only when Lady Brabberstone told me that *you* had been false to me—that you had accepted her son Guy—"

"Ah! she said *that*! she dared to tell you that!" cried Elizabeth, "and you—you believed such a horrible thing?"

"What was I to think? She told it me as a fact, as a confidential disclosure, and claimed my congratulations—"

Elizabeth wrung her hands. All the cold and proud disdain which had hurt him so deeply, was merged into despair. In the sudden pallor and distress of her bright face he read the unspoken secret of her heart, and the utter collapse of that wall of contemptuous indifference which she had been at so much pains to build up between them.

"It was a wicked lie!—before God, it was a lie!" she said, brokenly and indignantly.

"It was a lie spoken to part us. She guessed my interest in you; she found out I had been to see you, and she schemed for me to marry Rachel. But I did not see through it then. I only saw that you were ready to throw me over for a better match,—that you had not the faith in me which I had asked of you, and—forgive me if I believed you unworthy of my love. You were false to me, and so I left you. I was too proud to speak a word in my own favour. I left you on the very morrow of my victory, unable even to see once again the

idol whom I believed to be shattered for ever. Forgive me, I entreat you—forgive me—and—pity me !”

He spoke feelingly. A strong emotion shook his voice, and a deep regret lay in the dark and earnest eyes that seemed to be hollow and haggard with a burden of misery. The feeling was genuine, and the emotion was sincere, added to which, Marcus Cunningham could always speak effectively and movingly. Was it not his *métier* ? Moreover, such is the desperately deceitful composition of frail human nature, that Marcus truly and verily believed that he had stated the case actually as it had taken place. He could see himself (in fancy) retiring wounded and heart-broken from the neighbourhood of the girl who had thrown him over for Guy Brabberstone’s future title. He could picture to himself his own disappointment and bitter disgust at Lady Brabberstone’s news, and when in a broken voice he murmured,—

“I was frightfully cut up—only pride and anger kept me from utter despair. I do not know to this day how it was that I did not have a brain fever !” his voice had so genuine a ring, and his self-conviction carried the impress of truth so strongly marked upon it, that Elizabeth would have been less than woman, or more than human, to have doubted him.

She did not doubt him. Fate had come between them ; a selfish and ambitious old woman had misrepresented things on both sides, and, for her own mean and miserable motives, had distorted and warped the judgment and affections of two young people who loved each other truly, and who, without her malign influence, might have been perfectly and divinely happy together. That was how it seemed to her ; and the marvel of it was, that that was also how it seemed to him !

She uttered no word of reproach to him, only she wrung her small gloved hands in that agony of regret and despair which to many women is often the expression of the bitterest and direst suffering. She longed to be alone,—somewhere where she would be quite away from him, and in the darkness, so that no eye should be able to watch her, and she might wrestle in solitude with this horrible discovery. Marcus was too great a student of human nature, too clever an observer of the passions of his fellow-creatures, to take a further advantage of the ground he had gained.

Some one came up to them—some of her departing guests—a lady and her two daughters.

“Dearest Lady Ingram, here you are ! I have been looking for you everywhere, to wish you good-night. Such a charming evening, my dear ! Such a success ! We have enjoyed it so

much. And that delightful creature has been singing so *too* divinely upstairs! What a pity you were downstairs! Dear Lady Ingram, good-night, good-night."

Elizabeth had risen mechanically to her feet and was answering she knew not how to the string of common-place flatteries. She had no idea who the "delightful creature" was who had been singing upstairs. All she knew was that she wished that everybody would say good-night and go away quickly.

"So kind of you," she murmured vaguely. "I am glad you have been pleased," and she shook hands with them, and they went.

Then she turned round upon Marcus Cunningham. She was pale as death; hollow circles had fixed themselves about her eyes; there were hard dragged lines about her flower-petalled lips, and a certain drawn look in her whole face which suggested pathetically pain that was well-nigh unbearable.

Their eyes met.

Regret—remorse—deep suffering—unutterable self-reproach—and, ah!—worse than aught else!—a love that was stronger than them all, was what he read in that look of utter anguish.

"Go!" she said, with almost voiceless lips; and without a word, without even a grasp of the hand, he turned and left her. He had done enough for one day.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A FAREWELL.

MEANWHILE, upstairs, something else had been taking place which was not without its importance to certain other characters of my story.

It was whilst Lady Ingram and Marcus Cunningham were downstairs comparing notes concerning the past upon the sofa in the supper-room, that Rachel Brabberstone saw her father shaking hands, with much effusion and delight, with an elderly little man with grey whiskers and a bald head.

"Come here, Rachel," he cried out to her, "I want to introduce you to one of my very oldest friends, whom I have not met for years and years. This is my girl Rachel—she wasn't born when we last met!—dear me, how time flies!—and you have a son, you tell me?"

"Yes, he is here—he brought me, in fact. I do not see him at this moment; he must be in the next room. My dear Miss Brabberstone, I am delighted to make the acquaintance of my

old friend's daughter, and very proud he ought to be of such a daughter as you, my dear ! ”

The old gentleman was shaking hands with her smilingly, and looking at her with admiration. He wondered where he had seen that sweet oval face, with its dark eyes and hair before—or if he had ever seen it—or if it was only in a dream that he had seen it. Rachel was not at all like her father ; she was like her mother ; and Squire Sherwood had never seen Lady Brabberstone, his friendship with Lord Brabberstone dated from his bachelor days—it could not, therefore, be a family likeness which he recognised in her face, and yet it seemed somehow to be familiar to him.

Rachel was not told the name of her father's friend, but she spoke very pleasantly to him all the same ; and Lord Brabberstone said a few kindly words concerning the sad death of Lady Clorinda, whom she gathered to be the old gentleman's wife, and a few more words concerning her father, “ the late Earl,” whose death, he was sure, he must have felt very deeply.

Rachel was still quite in the dark as to who he could be, but she stood by, looking sympathetic and interested.

“ And you say it is twenty years since you were in London ? Good Lord ! why, it's half a life-time ! I wonder you ever plucked up the courage to come back at all after so long ! ”

“ It was my boy brought me up ”—and the Squire turned his head again to look for his broad-shouldered son,—“ my boy takes me out everywhere. I have been out every night, Brabberstone,—every single night,” he repeated, rubbing his hands together with boyish glee ; “ he likes taking me about, you see ; he calls it showing me life—*me*, his old father ! ha ! ha ! We have been out very late ; there was a club to which he belongs ; we weren't home till daylight, I assure you ! And we go to all the theatres ; and last night there was a billiard match he took me to see—it amused me very much. I had not seen such a thing since we were at Oxford, Brabberstone ! But I'm going home again this week. I'm getting knocked up with it all, you see. I'm too old, I think. It don't do at sixty, as I tell my boy. He doesn't like my going away at all, he says ; and he has taken quite a holiday since I've been in town—for he works very hard, does my boy, and it's evident people think a great deal of him. Now where has the young scoundrel got to ? I want you to see him ! for a finer fellow—though I am his father, and oughtn't, I suppose, to say so—doesn't walk ! Ah, here he comes at last ! ”

Somebody came up behind her, a tall man, much taller than the little old gentleman who was recounting his London ad-

ventures with his boy with so much delight. Rachel turned quickly, and found herself face to face with Vere Sherwood.

"Here, Vere, I want to introduce you to Lord Brabberstone, one of my oldest friends; we were at college together, Vere,—got into all sorts of scrapes. We haven't met for years, not since your poor mother died, but we recognised one another at once; very curious that! You are not changed a bit, you know! And this is Miss Brabberstone, my old friend's daughter."

Vere found himself shaking hands with Lord Brabberstone. Rachel felt as if she should sink into the earth with shame and confusion. She was bewildered, too, bewildered and amazed. This man whom she had looked down upon, and despised, whose origin she had always believed to be humble, so humble that to love him had seemed to her to be a shame and a disgrace, was after all the son of an old college friend of her father's; his mother had been an earl's daughter; he was her equal then in birth, and ah! how much more than her equal in nobility of soul.

Her cold fingers rested for a moment in his hand—she had not the courage to lift her eyes to his face. How fearfully he must despise her! How triumphantly he must behold her utter confusion! She was tongue-tied; she could not utter a word, not a single word!

And all the time how sorry Vere was for her! How acutely he realised all her pain and humiliation! If she had only dared to lift her eyes to his, she would have seen nothing there but regret and tenderness; she need not have feared to look up.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, young man," she heard her father say heartily. "You must come and see us in Grosvenor Street. Lady Brabberstone will be glad to see you any day at lunch. Your father's son will always be always be welcome. What is your son doing, Sherwood? You said he worked hard?"

"Vere is a Musician," replied the old man stoutly, and rather defiantly. "He has a wonderful talent for music,—always had, so I let him follow his own bent in life."

It was an astonishing fact that the Squire by this time actually believed that this was the correct statement of the case.

"Quite right, quite right!" assented Lord Brabberstone politely. If he was surprised, not having been hitherto in the habit of considering music in the light of a serious occupation in life, he was far too well-bred to show it.

"Yes; I knew you would agree," said the old man eagerly, for having converted himself so thoroughly, he was above all

things anxious to convert everyone else. "I hold that if a man has a talent, he'd much better make his living by it, whatever it is, than by trying to do something else he has no vocation for. So Vere took to music as a profession, and I for myself don't see anything to be ashamed of in it."

"And I see a great deal to be proud of in it, Lord Brabberstone," said Vere, with a quiet laugh.

"Certainly, certainly, Mr Sherwood; besides, a gentleman can do anything he likes, and be no less than a gentleman always, so long as he keeps his hands clean, and his honour stainless."

This was a fine sentiment, and quite in accordance with Vere's own views on the subject. His eyes glistened. He was glad that it was Rachel's father who said it. Lord Brabberstone's theories were certainly quite beautifully true and admirable, but whether his practice of his own precepts would have carried him so far as to give his only daughter in marriage to a man so placed in the world as was his old friend's son, is perhaps a more doubtful matter.

"I am very glad indeed that you are getting on well," he said again with great heartiness; then Rachel spoke for the first time.

"Papa, we heard Mr Sherwood sing two years ago, don't you remember? I—I knew you once, Mr Sherwood," she added timidly; "perhaps you have forgotten?"

The old men continued their talk; Vere came round to her side.

"No. I have forgotten nothing," he said, very sadly. Then, after a moment of embarrassment, he added,—*"I have seen by the papers that you are engaged to be married. I ought to wish you joy, ought I not?"*

She shivered a little, turning her head away from him uneasily.

"No, no; do not! do not say anything," she murmured distressedly.

The old men were recalling to one another some incident of their boyhood: it was a good story, no doubt, for Lord Brabberstone had his hand on the Squire's shoulder, and they were both laughing heartily.

Rachel moved a little away—Vere followed her.

"You will tell me at least when you are going to be married; will it be soon?"

"I do not know. Oh, Vere, why, did I not know? why did you not tell me?" she burst forth, with all her impetuous weakness.

"Tell you what, Rachel?"

"That—that your people knew my father,—that your birth is as good as my own,—that, in short, we are equals."

"My poor Rachel!" There was a world of pity in his voice. "And would you then have decided differently had you known of that small fact,—that utterly valueless thing,—that my grandfather, whom I never saw, was an earl,—that my great-uncle, who has never asked me inside his doors, has a title. It is impossible that you can judge me more favourably, or care for me any better, for such a mean and contemptible reason as that. If you did not love me well enough for myself,—for what I am,—for my own identity, how could it be possible that you should have loved me any better because of my parentage or my connections? I had rather not think that such a consideration could have weighed with you for one single moment," he added, with warmth and a firm scorn which he was at no pains to conceal.

Rachel hung her head and was silenced. On a broad theoretical basis what he said was no doubt perfectly true. It *is* contemptible to judge people by their place in the world, and to think better of them because they are well connected. It is what William Makepeace Thackeray, and all other great minds before and after him, who have no patience and no sympathy with the small frailties of human nature, have branded, and most rightly branded, with the crushing name of Snobbism. But, as a matter of absolute fact, it is a Snobbism of which not one of us is absolutely free.

Rachel, it is true, felt humbled and ashamed of herself, and in the face of the virtuous indignation of the man she loved, she was quite incapable of pleading a word in her own favour; yet she knew so much more than he did of the world and its ways, that she was convinced that there was reason and common-sense in her point of view. She had no doubt at all that if she had had the courage to go to her parents and to lay her lover's cause before them, the consent which would have been indignantly refused to the poor and unknown musician might have very possibly been given had she been able to tell them that he was well-born and had relations whose names were to be found recorded in the estimable pages of Debrett.

There would have been a battle, perhaps, but in that battle there would have been, in consequence of these things, an element of success, and a fair chance of victory in the long run.

But of all this she could not say one single word. She was tongue tied. A cold despair froze her heart into stone. How explain when he misunderstood her so completely? How make him see with her eyes the common things of this prosaic life,

when he would persist in tilting against the world with the holy wrath of an avenging St George? It seemed to her at that moment as though an ocean, cold and broad and pitiless, rolled betwixt them, and divided them for ever with its dark and hopeless waters.

Nothing she could say or do would bridge it over, or bring them, even in sympathy, nearer to one another. It seemed as though she was always destined to be thus misjudged and condemned by him.

She had not been strong enough to throw in her lot with his, she had even promised herself to another, from worldly motives of prudence and desirability; of love, therefore, there was an end, for ever and ever. Yet she yearned for his good opinion and his respect with an anguish of fruitless longing which seemed to rend her very soul into tatters.

Even that was denied to her.

As they stood thus together in the midst of the crowd, that saw nothing of the tragedy and heeded it not—for when does the world ever heed or care for the tragedies which go on every day and every hour in its very midst?—as these two stood a few yards apart, face to face, yet whole worlds asunder, he, looking gloomily away from her face over her head at a picture upon the wall, which conveyed no impression save that of a blank despair to his mind—she, with drooping head and a great weight of misery at her heart, all at once some instinct, some mesmeric influence, perhaps, in the undercurrent of their souls, drew their eyes suddenly together, and he saw in hers great unshed tears that filled them with a brimming sorrow, whilst she read in his the love of a true heart that has been flung back dishonoured upon itself.

Then all his anger melted away, and there was something so tender and so pitiful in the look which he bent upon her, so full of true forgiveness and of sublimest compassion, that almost it drove away her fears, and tempted her to throw herself upon his mercy once more.

“Rachel,” he murmured tenderly.

For half a moment it seemed as though Paradise itself were opening before her, and wild possibilities of all lost save love itself rose tumultuously before her eyes.

But fate disposes of these moments of exaltation in a fashion peculiar to itself.

“My dear boy, I have been telling Brabberstone he must hear you sing. Surely you might sit down to the piano for a moment—see, it is close behind you.”

“Yes—do, do sing something,” echoed the suave-toned voice

of Lady Arthur Millbanke, whose vocation it ever was to rush in "where angels fear to tread," although it would be a libel upon her wit to say that she resembled in any way the "fool" concerning whom these words were spoken.

The *rapprochement* was over, the opportunity lost; Rachel fell back a few paces to her father's side, and Vere turned round coldly to the piano. He sat down and ran his fingers lightly over the keys. There came a rush of people from the other room. "Vere Sherwood is going to sing!" they said excitedly to one another as they crowded up into the doorways.

This is what Vere Sherwood sang:—

"You have not loved me enough, love,
You have not dared to be true;
So now I will wish you good-bye, love,
Good-bye to my dreams and to you.

"It is better by far we should part, love,
Since I cannot be lover nor friend;
So, wish me good-bye from your heart, love,
And let it all come to an end.

"For life, it is brimful of grief, love,
And love to be true must be brave;
And I know, though I wish you good-bye, love,
I shall carry your heart to my grave."

Both the words and the music were the improvisation of the moment. What induced him to compose and sing them? Vere never afterwards knew: they came from him instinctively, out of the exceeding bitterness of his heart. The wild wailing air in the minor key to which the lines were set, was like the sobbing dirge of an unfathomable sorrow, the farewell of a broken heart to all the brightness of life. It was intensely beautiful. Ere the last chord had died away, Rachel Brabberstone, white as death, had pushed her way through the crowd that was already murmuring its applauses, and sought refuge by her mother's side.

"I am dead tired; take me home, mother," she said to her, with the manner of a child that is worn out with fatigue. All around her she heard a babel of voices.

"How divinely pathetic!"

"How exquisite!"

"What a wonderful amount of feeling he puts into his voice."

"It is the most lovely thing I ever heard him sing! I wonder if it is his last new song, and who publishes it?"

To Rachel it was the eternal doom of her love. She was unworthy of him, and he had chosen this cruel way of telling her that he despised her!

That was how it seemed to her.

She forgot, or perhaps she did not know, than an intensely musical nature can express itself in the art which is the outlet of its inner being, with a completeness which it can do in no other way. Just as there are some to whom words will not come readily unless they flow through the medium of the pen; and others for whom the touch of a paint-brush can unlock the cupboard of the soul's most secret sanctuary. It was natural that Vere Sherwood should speak to her thus through the medium of what was the meat and drink of his most holy thoughts.

But to her it was only a public avowal of his contempt, a needlessly outspoken fashion of telling her that she was worthless.

Those who crowded about the piano with their thanks, and their exaggerated expressions of praise and admiration, asked him the name of his song, his *charming* song they called it, with an affected emphasis that jarred upon him painfully.

"It has no name," he answered, somewhat roughly and ungraciously, trying to make his way out of the knot of ladies who had crowded round him. Vere always was impatient of these drawing-room flatteries, and inclined to be angry with the fine ladies who mobbed his path with their meaningless phrases and stereotyped delight.

"Oh, then it is not published yet, Mr Sherwood?" cried one sweet impulsive young thing, in white, clasping her hands ecstatically together. "Oh, *may* I ask—*would* you tell me—when it will be out, so that I may order it immediately?"

"It will never be published," he replied, bowing coldly, and trying to get past her; "it is not intended for publication."

There was a wail of disappointment and of regret on all sides, amidst which he managed to effect his escape.

But by that time Rachel and her parents had gone away.

"It was perhaps brutal of me," he said to himself, as he went home that night, "but it was best to be harsh to her. She is not brave or true enough to risk all for me. She will not break her engagement for my sake, and short of that I will have none of her. If I cannot be her lover, then I will not go through the mockery of seeming to be her friend."

As to Rachel Brabberstone, she spent a night of agony. There is no anguish so great as indecision, no torture so complete as that rack whereon a weak but affectionate nature is tossed alternately by fruitless longings, torn in twain by insurmountable fears.

She had believed that all was settled and decided for her,—

that she had chosen wisely and prudently, and that her heart was silenced and overruled for ever. She had believed herself to be at peace, and had told herself that she was content with the lot she had chosen.

And now, lo and behold, the work of months was undone in an hour! She had seen and spoken to Vere Sherwood again, and her love had rushed back upon her in an overwhelming flood.

Never indeed had she been so near to the truth and the courage which would have decided her fate for ever, as in those few brief seconds when her sorrow-laden eyes had read all the enduring tenderness in his; almost she had yielded, almost she had spoken words which would have created a perfect earthquake in her existence, yet would have set her upon a pinnacle for ever in the estimation of the man she loved. And whilst she had hesitated, whilst the irrevocable words had trembled upon her lips, they had come and asked him to sing, and all was over, and the opportunity lost for ever!

And he, all unconscious of the nearness of the joy that was almost his, had gone away and sung that horrible song to her, *at* her as it seemed, wishing her good-bye because she did not love him well enough to be brave!

Well, now that she was away from him, alone in the darkness of the night, she was sure that he was right, and that the courage to do and dare all for his sake would never come so near her again.

She thought it all over with a painful exactitude, weighing the alternatives repeatedly that rang themselves like living torments through her aching, throbbing head.

On one side there was Marcus Cunningham, to whom she was pledged in the sight of the whole world; who presumably loved her; whose future was bound up in her; who was in every way the most desirable husband who had ever been suggested to her, and whose union with herself would call down the blessings of her parents, and the approval of all her friends and relations.

On the other hand there was nothing to plead but an insane love for a man whom nobody would consider a suitable husband for her, and whose manner of life was utterly uncongenial to her.

The ties that bound her to Marcus seemed to her to be veritable chains of iron. To break them would be to create a frightful scandal,—to plunge two families into distress and consternation,—to endure the reproaches and angry vituperations of her father and mother, and to be fortified by a strength of will and a determination to go her own way of which she felt herself utterly incapable.

For the hundredth time she said to herself that no, she could not do it!—although she could not but acknowledge to herself that the son of Lady Clorinda Sherwood, had her engagement to Cunningham not been a fact, would have been a suitor whose claims her father could not have scorned so entirely as the lowly-born and utterly insignificant individual whom she had always supposed Vere to be.

“He should have told me long ago,” she said to herself bitterly. And yet she could not but recognise the nobility of soul which had omitted the information as wholly irrelevant to the cause which he had to plead.

Vere Sherwood’s pride was in himself, in the manliness which was a part of his being, and in the beautiful and elevating profession to which he had devoted his life and his genius, not in those poor accidents of birth or connection which vain and foolish men have agreed to worship. He had the spirit, as rare as it is wonderful, of a true Liberal. To him men were equal not because of their birth or their money, but in so far as they made themselves equal by hard work and talent; and those only deserved to rise who rose by virtue of their superiority upon the shoulders of the slothful and the ignorant.

Those were Vere Sherwood’s principles; they are, no doubt, the principles of all noble minds. This is the liberty which is true liberalism, and which is lost sight of in the sad chaos of this dear old England of ours, where patriotism has become a bye-word, and true greatness is no longer regarded; where paid agitators and howling stump orators have led astray the honesty and the honour of Englishmen, and where “all are for the party, and none are for the State.”

But Rachel Brabberstone, clever and beautiful girl as she was, was yet incapable of comprehending the character of the man she loved. Vaguely indeed, as one sees a glimmer of starlight in a moonless night, she knew that it was beautiful. It was too great for her,—far above her head, and yet it was beautiful!

She reached out her hands in the darkness to that true heart, to that simple nature, that was noble in its very simplicity; but she knew that he was too good for her,—knew that he judged her hardly and righteously, as gods are said to judge the children of men.

And so ere she sank into a troubled slumber with the grey dawn of the London day, she laid down her hands once more in helpless misery, and said to herself again, with long-drawn sobs of a hopeless despair,—

“I cannot help myself—I cannot fight my way out of it all

to get to him ! He does not think me worthy of him ! He is right, I *am* unworthy ! All I can do for his sake is to love him, and to suffer."

And morning broke over the sleeping city, and brought no comfort with its early sunbeams either to her, or to the millions who awoke with her to a fresh day of sorrow and of endurance.

And Squire Sherwood, when next day he found himself in his son's lodgings in Bloomsbury, stood before the mantelpiece and saw once more the portrait of a dark-eyed, oval-faced lady with a sweet, gracious air. Then he remembered her, and knew with an unerring instinct that Vere loved Lord Brabberstone's only daughter.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE LADIES' GALLERY.

FEW places in all London can have been the scene of more hopes and fears, of more breathless anxieties, tumultuous heart-burnings, and bitterest disappointments, than the Ladies' Gallery in the House of Commons.

Here, where so many women who know very little and care still less about what is going on in the world's history, come only to be amused or to yawn, or because there was "nothing better doing," and it sounds creditable to be interested in politics, there have also come hundreds of others with beating hearts and a sense of almost sickening anxiety,—mothers and wives and sweethearts to hear the speeches of the men who are nearest and dearest to them, to be invisible and silent witnesses either of their triumph or of their disaster.

These women have come in very early, pale and self-contained, intent only on getting a good place where they can see a little as well as hear, careless of bodily discomfort, of cramped bones and of a lengthened fast, so only that they be there to hear and to know either the best or the worst.

Amongst these latter came Lady Ingram on the night of the great debate upon the Condition of the Agricultural Labourer, to listen to the great speech of the man she loved best in all the world.

For she knew that she loved him ; the scales had fallen from her eyes at last, and all the vain pretences of pride and resentment had melted like morning mists before the sun. She knew too that she loved him now better far even than in the short love fever of her girlhood's days,—that, in fact, her heart had

never ceased to be his, only that the smothered fire pent in so long had burst forth again with a fiercer and more lurid glow than ever.

She believed too that he loved her; and—alas! for her!—she had forgiven him fully and freely. Had he not told her that it was Lady Brabberstone who had tricked them both, and had driven him from her? She believed it absolutely. There was indeed so much of truth in the statement that it was well-nigh impossible that she should have failed to believe in it. The love was hopeless, but it was at least mutual.

The revelation was all too new and too wonderful for its bearings upon her future life to have presented themselves to her mind. She loved and she was beloved! that was as yet enough for her. I doubt whether to any woman of strong feelings the discovery of such affection under any circumstances brings with it at first any other sensation save an acute realisation of a divine and overwhelming rapture that is in itself for a time all-sufficient and all-satisfying.

Ever since Sunday evening Elizabeth had lived in a trance. She had gone about her daily business—her drives and her visits, her shopping, and her evenings spent at her friends' houses—like one wrapt in a dream of heavenly joy to whom the things of this world are of naught. Crouching down upon the floor, with her silken draperies trailing in the dust, and her face pressed to the prison-like grating behind which, like animals in a wild beast show, the noble being Man sees fit in this enlightened country to pen up that portion of his existence which he ironically terms his "better half," Lady Ingram awaited, with a tension that was almost pain, amidst a crowd of other still and silent figures all huddled together in the gloom of the narrow gallery, for the first sound of the voice of the new member for East Silshire.

Now and then there arose a little whispering and a sound of stifled laughter amongst those hushed and silent forms; but these came from women who did not care, and who took no interest, and whom their graver sisters heartily wished had remained at home. Indignant glances, and sometimes angry ejaculations, soon silenced these frivolous-minded persons, who were certainly largely in the minority, most of the ladies betraying a keen and eager interest, and a breathless attention to what was going on below.

Lady Ingram, with her guilty secret throbbing at her heart, crouching on the ground in order to get nearer and to hear better, looked and listened with the rest.

How glad she felt now that she had overcome her silly scruples,

and had consented to accept Lord Dalmaine's escort and care for the evening. No one else but himself, perhaps, could have ensured her entrance on so important a night, no one else could have managed so cleverly to get her a front place.

What did his amorous glances and sentimental speeches matter to her, so long as she had got what she wanted? Lord Dalmaine sank into a mere nonentity just now on her mind. He had met her at the foot of the little winding stone staircase, and had helped her out of her carriage with an effusion which was almost lover-like. He had seemed to wish to detain her for a little, to keep her standing outside for a few minutes whilst he gazed into her face and murmured his tender little platitudes into her ears, but Elizabeth had hurried him on ruthlessly and heartlessly.

"Oh, don't let me be late!" was all she had said. "I want so much to get a front place. Pray let us make haste, or I shall lose it."

"I will come and take you out for some tea presently," he said, as he saw her into her corner on the floor.

"Oh, not yet—thanks. I shall not think of moving until—until the best speakers have spoken,"

And then she had turned her back upon him, pressing her face against the grating, so that Dalmaine had found himself compelled to retire as gracefully as he could from a place in which a male being has no more right to linger—or, indeed, even to enter—than he would have in a railway compartment specially reserved for the fair sex.

Two hours had gone by. There had been a good many speeches, some good and some very bad. A great many excited Irishmen had risen in their places, in and out of order, and had fulminated, and declaimed, and denounced; had been received with laughter and derision, or with the "Oh, oh's," of indignation and disgust; or else, being summarily nipped in the bud by the Speaker, they had subsided into their seats. A great philanthropist had spoken at length, and had been listened to with respect and attention, but his peroration had been welcomed with a relief which betrayed the dulness of his oratory and the boredom of his audience. Then a statesman on the Opposition bench, who is respected alike by friend and foe, had got up, and had given to the House and to history one of those sober and sensible speeches for which he has become famous, brushing away, with his matter-of-fact realities, all the shams and the delusions which, like coloured flags, are for ever being fluttered before the bewildered eyes of the British public, and striking home to the understanding of all, with the terse

sentences and unvarnished truths for which he has won an honoured place in the hearts of his countrymen.

When this noble Marquis had sat down again, amidst general applause, another very well-known man arose excitedly, and contradicted flat everything he had said, and made a number of other statements in a very violent and sarcastic manner, all tending to show without a shadow of a doubt that the great man who had spoken last was the vilest turncoat and the most mischievous political weathercock in the whole of Parliamentary history.

However, as nobody paid this individual any other compliment save to laugh immoderately at almost every word that issued from his mouth, which is all perhaps that this honourable gentleman aims at or cares to extract from the very unsympathetic world into which his utterances have now been vainly cast for so many years, it may be presumed that neither his fulminations nor his statements materially influenced the issue of the debate.

After that there was a little pause, which suggested interest and expectancy. Some members who had gone out into the lobby during the course of the last speech, came quickly in again and took their places hurriedly, whilst a young man with a fine intellectual head, somewhat Byronic in its outlines, stood up quietly in his place, and began to speak.

"Who is it?" whispered the ladies to one-another up in the gallery.

And some said they did not know, and others whispered back the name of Cunningham, or thought it was, the new member for Silshire; and they craned their necks forward to see him as well as to hear, for rumour had gone forth that Mr Cunningham was well-looking as well as young, and the ladies, we all know, be they ever so erudite, or ever so serious in mind and mien, are not one of them at all averse to a good-looking young fellow, wherever and whenever he may be met with.

But as for Elizabeth, she neither asked nor gave any information at all. Her whole soul, her entire being, was in her eyes, and in the intense mental and physical strain with which she gave herself up to the effort of catching every syllable that fell from his lips.

I do not, I could not if I wished it, transcribe Marcus Cunningham's speech, nor is it my province to set forth as he did the wrongs and the rights of our English Agricultural Labourer.

That he pleaded for them well and nobly, in language which

went to the hearts of all who heard him, and that his speech produced a profound and most powerful effect upon his audience, has never been disputed, even by those whose political creeds differed widely from his own.

For he appealed not so much to a particular party or to a particular Government, but to that large and grand principle of humanity which is, after all, the great key-note of universal sympathy, and which, amongst all the turmoil and the strife of ignoble purposes, is too often now lost sight of altogether. In less time than it has taken me to write it, the House of Commons, which is no doubt by its very essence fitted to be the best judge of any legislative body in the whole civilised world upon such a subject, came to the knowledge that it had to do here with someone that was not as the ordinary young speakers at its critical tribunal are wont to be.

This young man, with fire in his eye, tenderness in the tones of his mellow voice, and a flow of words that seemed almost miraculous, was not as other young men of his age and standing.

The impetuosity of the orator, the soul of the patriot, and the polish of the scholar, all were in Marcus Cunningham combined. He who had known how to move the masses of his rough and unlettered fellow-creatures, knew also how to stir to their very depths the souls and the minds of the representatives of England's people.

When he spoke—setting forth all the history, and all the patient heroism of that class of whom he had constituted himself, not the agitator to deeds of unhallowed and short-sighted violence, but the advocate and champion in the peaceful might of a cause so good that it needs neither dynamite nor lawlessness to prove its truth, those who listened to him realised that here was no party slave, no truckler to the stereotyped platitudes of other men, but a “patriot” in the truest and highest sense of a word that has been so vilely abused by all sorts and conditions of mercenary and self-seeking intriguers—a patriot who desired his country's good above all things, but whose mind was broad enough to understand that no one class can be permanently benefited by the destruction or extinction of the other.

It was not the interest of one man only for which he pleaded, but for the mutual advantage of every Englishman alive.

It was here that Marcus was great. His mellow voice, his noble words, his arguments, as sound as they were simple, fell upon a breathless and delighted audience. Men who knew his father—and they comprised the most intellectual and best educated men in the House—said to each other, “No wonder ;

he is his father's son!" Those who knew not that highly-accomplished individual, became aware that a great orator had arisen unawares in their midst, and that the young man before them must be destined to play a great part in the history of his country.

Was it any wonder then that poor little Elizabeth, screened above behind her grating, and realising with all her one season's knowledge of the world the tremendous effect which this wonderful speech was making upon the crowd of men beneath her, felt her heart swell with pride, and her whole soul glow with glory over his splendid and unparalleled triumph! A clever woman loves through her mind and her brain as much as she does through her heart. In that hour of his mastery, Elizabeth forgot that she was married to Sir James Ingram,—forgot that he was engaged to her friend Rachel Brabberstone,—forgot all, in short, save that he was the greatest king and god amongst the men she had known, and that she worshipped him with all the strength and conviction of her whole nature.

There was amongst the crowd of men below, when Marcus sat down again in his place, a certain suppressed but perfectly tangible sense of intense excitement. There was that in the very air that made, as it were, an emphasis,—a mark, faint but indelible, upon the pages of history. It was felt by all who heard him, that there had arisen amongst them one who was born to be a master and a leader of his fellow-men. A great orator holds in his hands a power that nothing earthly can exceed or even equal, and the house knew at once that Marcus Cunningham was destined to greatness. What will he be—they said to one another—in a few years' time, when experience and a well-established reputation, and the *prestige* which is so valuable an adjunct to fame, have ripened and solidified in him these rare and wonderful gifts of speech?

Upstairs, in a very few moments, Dalmaine was standing at the door of the Ladies' Gallery. Elizabeth, when she caught sight of him, rose eagerly to her feet, and went out to join him. She was glad enough to come out now; there was the suffocation of a great joy in her heart; she wanted to breathe, to move, to speak aloud the words of delight that were choking her.

Her eyes shone, and her whole face was glowing with animation, as she took Dalmaine's arm.

"Well, our young friend has made his mark, I think," remarked the statesman, with quiet satisfaction. He was glad, of course, that such an evidence of genius had been added to the party; but just at present Lady Ingram herself, and her loveliness, were of chief importance in his eyes.

"Was it not splendid?" she cried enthusiastically. "Was it not a magnificent speech? Is he not gloriously and wonderfully clever? Surely he will be a great man some day?"

"No doubt he has a future, that young man, and probably a great one," assented Dalmaine, more calmly. "But you look very flushed, dear lady; you must be tired, I fear. It has been too hot for you in there. I wish I had fetched you before."

"Oh, no, I am not in the least tired; and how could I have come away any sooner?"

"Come, then. I have ordered some tea in one of the Committee Rooms; it will be quieter there."

He was leading her through endless long passages, dimly lighted from above, and soft carpeted under foot.

Elizabeth was in that sort of condition of exaltation and rapture that she scarcely knew where she was being taken; she certainly did not care.

Suddenly at a corner they came upon a knot of men all surrounding and wringing the hands of a fine-looking old man with hawk-like eyes and a flowing white beard.

"It is Sir Frederick Cunningham," whispered Dalmaine; "I must stop one moment and congratulate him on his son's speech."

"Introduce me to him, I beg of you," cried Elizabeth eagerly.

The introduction was effected, and Lady Ingram found herself one of the enthusiastic group who were all saying flattering things to the old man about his son's success.

"I am charmed—charmed to make your acquaintance, Lady Ingram," said Sir Frederick, with his odd, halting speech. "I know—your husband—very well. I have wished to know you. I would be glad to make known to you my son whom you have heard—speak—to-night for the first time."

"Oh, but I do know him! and, what is more, I have heard him speak before."

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she repented them. Everybody turned to her at once. She became the centre of interest; and she found herself besieged with questions concerning the when, the how, and the where she had enjoyed this wonderful privilege.

To her vexation, she felt that she blushed vividly; and at the same time she noticed Lord Dalmaine's eyes fixed curiously upon her. She hastened to explain that it was only in the country, at a small town in Silshire, during the time of the elections. And as fortunately a gentleman here remarked how seldom a man who can talk eloquently to the masses has any effect at all in the House of Commons, and what a rare combination of talents Marcus thus displayed, she was able, under

cover of the little discussion which ensued, to take her leave of Sir Frederick, and to continue her walk along the passages upon Dalmaine's arm.

"So," he said slowly, "Marcus Cunningham is then an old friend of yours? I had understood from you that last Sunday—or the Sunday before, was it?—was the first time he had ever been to your house."

"And so it was," she answered, with a shade of embarrassment, which did not escape his notice, in her eyes and voice. "I had not seen him since I married; but I knew him once slightly—very slightly, before I married."

"Oh!" Lord Dalmaine looked annoyed. He doubted the slightness of the acquaintance, and resented the evidences of interest she displayed with regard to the young orator.

"I have never seen her blush like that before," he said to himself sulkily and jealously; for he was a vain man, and could not bear to take a second place in the thoughts of any lady to whom he devoted himself.

"Come in here," he said, opening a door to the left.

They entered one of the large Committee Rooms that look out on to the river.

A small repast of tea and toast, and that poached egg which had been, as she laughingly said, a part of the bargain, was laid on a tray at one side of the long ponderous-looking table.

The windows were wide open, and a splendid moonlight flooded the world without.

Elizabeth uttered an exclamation of delight, and went across the room and leant out with rapture into the beauty of the night.

The moon stood nigh in the heavens, and glittered in a sheet of rippling silver over the river, whilst a hundred lights along the opposite shore reflected themselves in fire-fly points of flame in its trembling waters.

Immediately below, upon the gloom of the Terrace, a few members were walking up and down enjoying a breath of the sweet night air, and the whiff of a cigarette, ere returning to the labours of the debate.

Even at this height Elizabeth could hear the murmurs of their voices, and the faint echo of the one name that was for the moment upon every one's lips.

"How beautiful it is!" she said, turning back to the room behind her. "Such a lovely night! But, all the same, I cannot live upon moonlight, and I want my tea very badly, Lord Dalmaine." She came back to the table, divested herself of her long cloak, and sat down.

The great man, charmed back into good-humour by her

smile, hastened to minister to her wants. The steaming tea refreshed her, and perhaps in a measure calmed the undue elation of her spirits ; neither did she despise the more prosaic sustenance of the egg, and the crisp hot toast. Lord Dalmaine could manage these little feasts, so dear to the feminine taste, with a dexterity and a completeness that were peculiar to himself. For all that Elizabeth knew, ladies had tea and toast every night of the session in the empty Committee Rooms. She had certainly no suspicion that such an event was not a very usual occurrence.

Meanwhile, with the ready tact which came so easily to her, she made herself very very nice to him. She saw that a feeling of annoyance with her had ruffled him, and she did her best to do away with the untoward impression. Naturally, being a clever as well as a charming woman, she succeeded perfectly.

Lord Dalmaine resumed his usual serenity. He stood up in front of the fireplace, and looked at himself in the mirror above it. It was a little weakness of his, of which Lady Ingram was well aware. He could never pass a looking-glass without indulging himself in this respect ; sometimes it was only a furtive glance, but when thoroughly at his ease, he was wont to contemplate himself scrutinisingly and at length, with a delightful freedom from false shame that was quite refreshing to behold. He was looking at himself now, carefully and attentively toying with the corners of his shirt collar, and turning his head a little first to one side and then to the other as he did so, with a small smile of absolute satisfaction upon his lips.

Elizabeth having finished her tea, lent back in her armchair, and contemplated his proceedings with infinite amusement.

When he had done looking at himself, he turned round and looked at her. Then he drew an armchair up near her.

"Ought we not to be going back ?" she inquired, feeling suddenly that the *tête-à-tête* had lasted long enough.

"Not yet ; there will be nothing more of any importance for some time now."

He sat down. At that very moment the door suddenly opened, and a voice exclaimed,—

"Oh, here he is ! Dalmaine, Lord S—— wants to speak to you particularly. I have been looking for you everywhere ; fortunately Sir Fredrick Cunnningham told me which way you had gone, or I should never have found you. Can you come at once ? he is waiting."

Dalmaine had risen to his feet with a smothered expression of annoyance.

"I must request you to excuse me, Lady Ingram," he said, with a polite formality intended for the ears of the gentleman in the doorway. "I fear I am compelled to leave you for a few moments. Will you be so good as to remain here until I return? and then I will take you back to the Ladies' Gallery. I will not be longer than I can possibly help."

And then he went away, and Elizabeth was left alone. She got up, and went and leant out of the open window again.

The terrace below was dark and deserted now, only the broad moonlight swept the face of the night with its radiant purity. She could hear the murmur of the old river rushing at full tide to the sea, and the faint hum of the traffic across Westminster Bridge.

She did not hear the soft opening and shutting of the door, nor the swift footstep across the thickly-carpeted room behind her.

She heard nothing, until close at her side—some one said softly,—

"Elizabeth."

She turned with a start, and a little stifled cry.

Marcus Cunningham stood beside her.

Her whole face became flooded with great delight, she thrust her two hands impulsively into his.

"Oh!" she cried impetuously, "it is what I have been longing for so much, to see you, and to tell you myself how grandly you spoke, how proud I am for you!"

"My success could not be perfect until I had heard you say so," he answered, with a dangerous tenderness in his eyes, holding the hands she had given him tightly imprisoned in his own. "Did you hear me well?"

"Perfectly; I did not miss a single word. It was simply splendid!"

Suddenly he dropped her hands, and turned away with a gesture of irritation and impatience.

"Ah!" he exclaimed bitterly, "*you* can feel with me, but she to whom I am bound for life would not come and hear me speak to-night."

It was as if a wave of icy cold water had passed over her. Suddenly she remembered all that stood between them for evermore.

It was no doubt a salutary shock. Her eyes had shone too brightly, her heart had looked out of them all too plainly. There was a little moment of silence between them.

Then in her ordinary every-day voice she inquired,—

"Is it possible that Rachel refused to come? she who takes so much interest in politics, and is so clever?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ever since Sunday she has taken to her room and pretends to be ill. I confess I do not believe in the illness; it cannot be much, or she would at least have made the effort to be here to-night."

Again there was a silence. They stood one on either side of the embrasure of the window, both looking out into the beauty of the night.

A little fluttering sigh escaped involuntarily from her lips.

He heard it, and made a step towards her.

"Elizabeth," he murmured, with a sudden passionate eagerness which, in one who was usually so self-controlled, had a strange and vivid significance, "Elizabeth, I have made a horrible mistake in my life. I thought ambition and fame were to be enough for me. I thought I could do without love,—that I was strong enough to despise it, and so, when love came to me, I flung it aside. And now—and now—I find I cannot live without it. Now at last—at last—I know the truth!"

She trembled from head to foot. He came close to her, bent down towards her, took her cold hands in his, and would have pressed them to his fevered lips; but she snatched them away, and fell back from him in an agony of terror.

"Do not say it!" she cried brokenly; "for God's sake, do not say it! Do not fling away your honour for a moment of weakness, and say what we should both repent of till our dying day."

Perhaps he would have followed her, perhaps he would have urged her further, pressed her more hardly than she could bear; for Marcus Cunningham had lost his head at last, and the passion of the one great love of his life surged uppermost within him, breaking down all the barriers with which prudence and the traditions of years had so long protected him. He forgot on that night of his worldly triumph all that lay at stake, and all that he was on the point of risking, and remembered only that Elizabeth was his very heart's desire, and that he was alone with her. But at that moment there was a noise of voices and footsteps without. The door opened, and a messenger inquired loudly whether Lady Ingram was here.

"I am Lady Ingram," answered Elizabeth, stepping forward.

"My lady, your servant has brought this note with the carriage. He says it is very urgent."

She tore it open.

"My husband is very ill," she said, half turning to Cunningham. "I must go home at once."

He hurried forward. But she waved him back with a gesture almost of horror.

Outside she met Lord Dalmaine coming back to find her. She took his arm.

"I have had bad news. Take me to the carriage, please. Jim has been taken very ill."

She was as white as ashes. Dalmaine put her into her carriage. She did not thank him or speak one single word, only there were dark circles round her eyes, which seemed to betray a mountain load of anguish.

"Odd things women are!" mused Lord Dalmaine, as he watched her brougham drive away. "Now, who would have supposed that little woman cared so much about poor old Jim Ingram?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TORRINGTON HOUSE.

Six weeks later, nothing on earth could present a greater contrast, nor illustrate more strongly the proverbial ups and downs of life, than did Elizabeth Ingram's daily existence, as compared to that upon which she had in so short a time apparently turned her back for ever.

From the whirl and toil which day and night surrounds a fashionable lady in the height of the London season; from receptions and dinners at home, to balls and soirées abroad; from the daily rush to the Park and to the exhibitions; from a charity bazaar to an afternoon concert; from somebody's benefit matinée to the impossible task of fitting ten tea-parties into one afternoon, behold my heroine transported to the absolute and peaceful solitude of a rambling old-fashioned white stone country-house, with a façade of Corinthian pilasters in front of it, and a dreary succession of tall narrow windows looking sadly out between them on to its smooth lawns and symmetrically-arranged clumps of rhododendrons and shrubberies.

Torrington House was one of those few remnants of a by-gone generation which are within an easy distance of London, and which are being daily swept away from off the face of the earth, to make way for rows of red brick Queen Anne villas, and snug little rows of shop-fronted tradesmen's habitations.

In its palmy days Torrington House had stood in the centre of a large and well-timbered park, and all around it had

stretched the green lanes and undulating pastures of that charming country which lies immediately to the north of the metropolis.

The park had disappeared now, and only the large gardens and shrubberies, and a vast expanse covered partly by a tangled kitchen-garden, and partly by empty glass houses in a shocking state of dilapidation, surrounded the big white house, and served to enfold it still in kindly seclusion from the prying eyes of the invading villas and newly-laid-out roads, which were creeping up nearer and nearer to it day by day.

Already the house itself had been doomed, and plans for cutting up the gardens into judicious "plots" had been drawn up and discussed, when, as the summer months were coming on, its owners, a firm of enterprising city contractors, not in immediate want of a deed of destruction, having for the nonce plenty of a like nature on hand, determined to put an advertisement into the *Times*, with a view to a summer let of two or three months before setting to work to demolish it in the autumn.

So it came to pass that, when the doctors who pulled Sir James Ingram out of the very jaws of death, and restored to him a partial and melancholy fragment of life, pronounced that he must go at once into country air, and must, if possible, be taken somewhere near enough to drive from door to door in his own carriage, so as to avoid all conceivable shakings and agitations, the notice about Torrington House caught the friendly eye of some sympathetic acquaintance, and negotiations were immediately set on foot, and successfully carried to an issue, to secure the "old-fashioned furnished house, standing in its own picturesque pleasure-grounds, within an easy drive of Hyde Park Corner," which was advertised in the daily papers.

Sir James Ingram, propped up with pillows, and rolled up in rugs, drove down to Torrington House; and with him went his pretty wife; and behind her was left for ever that life of excitement and of brightness which for a short space her blythe young beauty had so fitly adorned.

It seemed to Elizabeth as though the world had rolled back on its hinges, and that she was transplanted once more into the long past days of her girlhood; for up and down, up and down, it was again her destiny to walk for interminable daily hours to and fro the straight gravel walk in front of the white pilasters of Torrington House. Upon and down trudged her weary little feet in the wake of her paralyzed husband's invalid chair, that was dragged slowly about for endless dreary hours in the sunshine. For he would have her with him. If

she went for one second into the house, he called after her querulously, and sent the servant who drew his bath chair to find her. The poor old man, paralyzed hopelessly in both legs, and partially in one arm, bereft of all that makes life lovely, and existence worth possessing, still clung with a pitiful insistence to the young life he had linked so thoughtlessly with his own. He could not endure her to be out of his sight; her pretty face was the only sunshine which he cared for, and the sound of her voice the one pleasure which fate had left him to enjoy.

But for Elizabeth things were very terrible indeed. She was miserable. Her face grew thin and pale, her eyes sad and heavy, and the corners of her mouth drooped again as they used to do in the old days with the despondency of the fate against which she could make no available resistance. And all the time in the depths of her heart an echo kept on repeating for ever,—

“It is retribution,—the punishment for my sin!”

The sin of having owned to herself that she loved Marcus Cunningham!

She had not seen him again, not once since that night when he had all but told her she was still dear to him; had been so dangerously near a confession of his love to her.

During her husband's illness, his card, amongst a hundred others, had been left at her door to inquire for Sir James—but whether he had left it himself or had only sent it by a servant, she had never ascertained. That was the only evidence of his existence which she had received during all these weary weeks.

And she said to herself that it was her repentance and her remorse for her evil thoughts and sinful love which preyed upon her; but, as a matter of fact—Elizabeth not being a saint or an angel, nor anything else but a very human and very loving woman—it was nothing of the kind, but only the longing and the yearning to see again the man she loved, which was eating away into her very heart and life.

There was a dreary-looking pool on one side of Torrington House—a pool long left to its own devices, and overspread with thick green duck-weed—a pool where tangled osmunda and long lush grasses and starlike water flowers grew in oosy luxuriance; where slimy frogs croaked loudly in the summer night, and where little water hens darted swiftly too and fro, leaving long narrow lines upon the water behind them, marking their track across the emerald-covered surface.

Elizabeth used to look at this pool with a horrible fascination.

“I can always end it all and stop my pain *there*,” she got

into the habit of saying aloud to herself, and she wished she could have the courage to do it; but she knew very well that she would be afraid, for she was not of the fibre of which suicides are made; only, being utterly unhappy and lonely and desolate, the life which had lately been so bright and gay seemed to have no more value in it at all.

Judge then with what joy and delight she beheld Lady Arthur step out through the long windows upon the terrace walk on one of those interminable summer mornings, clad in a long fawn-coloured dust cloak, with a pretty bright red hat on her fair head.

Elizabeth uttered a cry of delight, and ran gladly to meet her.

"Blanche! is it really you?" she cried, with dancing eyes.

"Yes, my dear. Did you think I was never coming. I have arrived here, bag and baggage—with a dress basket and a portmanteau and a dressing-bag and my maid—all left in the front hall, for I have come to stay, my dear—to pay you a regular visitation. I don't know when you will get rid of me."

"Oh, Blanche, how good, how good of you! If you knew how lonely I have been! I felt as if life was over!"

"Why did you not ask me to come, then? little goose!"

"It was so dull. I thought you would never care to come to this desert."

"Well, you see I have come. London is insupportable; the heat suffocating. My poor dear has gone off yachting with the Duke. It's the only pleasure he has left, you know, and I don't grudge it him, but I can't yacht. It makes me sea sick. He was off to Cowes to join the 'Cinderella' yesterday, with his secretary and his valet, and all Paul de Kock's novels to improve his mind, packed up in his boxes. He will be quite happy for the next six weeks. But as for me, how could I possibly stop in Chapel Street in August? So I just packed up my things, and here I am."

"How good of you! But had you no visits?—nowhere more amusing to go to?"

"Nowhere that would please me half so much, dear!"

Lady Arthur kissed her affectionately.

"My sweet Elizabeth, you are looking very thin and ill; what is the matter with you? And poor Jim, how is he?"

The bath chair drew near, Blanche went out to meet it, and took the sick man's hand tenderly.

"You are better, are you not, Jim? You have had a bad time of it, but you are better! As to Elizabeth, she looks knocked up with nursing you. I have come to take care of you both."

"You are very good ; we shall be very glad to have you here," replied the invalid.

His speech was a little thickened, his eyes were dim and lustreless. At a glance, Blanche saw that he was but a wreck of the smart old man he had been a year ago. Her heart was filled with pity not only for him but for his little wife.

"What have you been fretting yourself so thin about?" she asked her later, when the invalid had been taken indoors, and the two friends were wandering together about the lawn.

Elizabeth looked out dully over the green pond and its border of tangled water weeds near which they had strayed.

"I suppose I am a very wicked woman," she answered, after a pause ; "I ought to say that I am thin because my husband is a hopeless cripple."

"But he is getting better, Elizabeth?"

She shook her head.

"No. The doctors say he will never be any better than he is now, and yet he may live for years—for years!" she repeated gloomily. "Poor fellow, poor Jim! it is sad enough, is it not? It is enough to make me ill and thin, is it not? For Jim has been always good to me—I did not love him—but he has been good to me always. Oh, yes, I ought to look ill, but," and a little bitter laugh broke feverishly from her lips, "but I am so wicked that that it is not half, no, nor yet the quarter, of why I am unhappy. If I were a good wife, I suppose I should have no thought but for my husband ; but I must be very, very wicked, I suppose, for there are other things that trouble me more, oh, far, far more!"

"Poor child," whispered Blanche Millbanke, softly pressing the arm she held in hers with a little gesture of compassionate comprehension ; for the woman of the world understood very well all about it.

When a woman has no love in her life, then pleasure and the distractions of the world fill up the place of it, and in a measure enable her to forget all that she has missed. But when she has lost all that false garish excitement as well, and is bereft both of love and of its hollow substitute, then indeed is her case a sad one—Lady Arthur did not think it wicked at all, only very natural.

In her heart she said,—

"I wonder if she misses Dalmaine?—or is it Marcus Cunningham? I have never quite been able to make out!" But she was far too clever to mention either name.

"Parliament is still sitting," she remarked casually.

"Yes ; so I see by the papers. It is very late, is it not?"

"Oh, they say the House won't be up till the 24th, and perhaps not then! Poor wretches, they are to be pitied! You have no idea what the heat is in town! By the way, if Jim is equal to it, let us have a few people down from Saturday till Monday. It would do you good, Elizabeth, and perhaps it would amuse him. It would be a charity, too, to give some of these poor legislators a breath of air."

Elizabeth's face brightened a little at once.

"I should like to ask Marcus Cunningham down for a Sunday," she said, quite simply; "if Jim is equal to it; and I would ask Rachel too, of course, as I hear they are still in town."

"And Lord Dalmaine?" queried Blanche laughingly; "don't you want him too?"

"Oh, no; he has ceased to amuse me," she said shortly.

"I am glad of that, Elizabeth," and Lady Arthur remembered with satisfaction how coldly that noble lord had alluded to Lady Ingram only two days ago. It had been evident to her that Elizabeth had offended him, and had fallen out of his good graces.

"I always knew that she could take care of herself," said Blanche to herself. "How wise I was not to interfere. As to Mr Cunningham, he will marry Rachel Brabberstone very soon now, from all I hear, and that danger also will avert itself in the natural course of events."

"Yes, let us have them down, by all means. Rachel is in town still, I know; I met her in Marshall & Snellgrove's only yesterday, trousseau buying, of course. She is in a whirl of millinery and 'chiffons,'—can talk of nothing else, in fact, nor her mother either. Into what a fearful state of idiotcy does a sensible girl sink at that period of her career! It is really pitiable!"

Lady Arthur looked studiously away into the tangled currant bushes by the kitchen garden walk, along which their purposeless wanderings had led them; she did not see the set face of her companion, although she just fancied she could hear a little catch in her breath, as she inquired, after half a minute's pause,—

"Then they are to be married soon, I suppose?"

"Immediately, I believe—at least as soon as the House is up—early in September, I think."

"There goes the luncheon bell," said Elizabeth quietly; "let us go in, dear—you must be quite hungry after your drive. Yes, by all means, let us have the lovers down for next Sunday!—they will amuse us; and Jim will like it, I know. Only

yesterday he was suggesting just one or two visitors ; and if there are not too many to begin with, it will not tire him. Let us go in and ask him."

Lady Arthur looked at her with admiration.

"I could not have done that better myself," she thought. "She is splendidly plucky ! She loves that man, I am sure ; but she is good and proud. She will not spoil his life, nor damage her own. And in time she will get over it ; and perhaps poor Jim will die, and she will be free to begin a new existence, and be happy. Once get Cunningham safely married, and all will be well !"

As for Elizabeth, she too had her self-musings as they walked silently together across the wide lawn.

"Thank God, he will soon be safe !" she said in her heart. "I shall be glad when he is married. For all the world I would not have him stain his honour for me, who can be nothing to him ! and I shall be better when he is happy—as who could help being happy with such a wife as Rachel ? As for me, I shall battle it out in time ; there will be plenty of time—a whole lifetime !"

They went indoors. Sir James was asking for her. Luncheon was on the table. The large old-fashioned rooms, with shabby carpets and faded curtains, filled with strange old-world spindle-legged tables and chairs, and dark-toned cabinets that must have stood immovable in their corners for more than a century, seemed to be less desolate and melancholy as a setting to Lady Arthur's golden hair and handsome face in the foreground, whilst the sound of her cheerful voice and pleasant worldly chatter about the world that was going on only seven miles away, brought back a certain amount of excitement and hope into Elizabeth's heart. Even Sir James, propped up in a sad fashion with pillows in his arm-chair, and feeding himself with a slow effort that was pitiful to see, became almost animated and interested, and roused himself to answer her, and to join in the conversation more than he had done yet since his illness began.

"You have done him good already," said Elizabeth gratefully to her, when the servant who waited on him had wheeled his invalid chair away into the adjoining room. "You are a dear woman, Blanche ! I am so glad you came."

Elizabeth herself was a little flushed and eager, a different person altogether from the pale sad-eyed woman who had greeted Lady Arthur on her arrival. Blanche had given her something to do and something to think of.

She sat down and wrote her letters to Rachel and to Cun-

ningham, penning the former with a heart full of generous impulses, and the latter with a little restraint which rendered the commonplace sentences in which she invited him to her house a trifle more formal than she perhaps was aware of.

Lady Arthur watched her write with a feeling of satisfaction. The wisdom of this world had been in her counsels. A less far-seeing friend would have advised her to avoid Marcus rather than to seek his society. Lady Arthur knew better. When a woman is fretting after a man whom she had no business to love, and who is hopelessly out of her reach, it is better for her to see him and to realise her position, than to eat her heart out for him and feed her passion by all the aggravations of absence and imagination.

"She will be better when she has thoroughly grasped the fact that the marriage is a certainty, and that she is obliged to suffocate her feelings under a mountain-load of decorous friendship. Nothing is so effectual a cure for the delusion of an unlawful affection as to watch the object of it devoting himself to another woman. It is a moral amputation of the heart, extremely painful, but excessively wholesome."

Thus argued Blanche; yet, unluckily, wise as she was, there was one item of this little drama which she did not reckon upon, because she was not in the least aware of it. This was the hitherto undiscovered fact of Marcus Cunningham's heart. Lady Arthur did not believe in the existence of such a thing. He was clever and fascinating, charming in manner and accomplished in all those things which attract women, but as his father had made him, so she believed him to be: cold, selfish, and calculating, and incapable of sacrificing his ambition or his career to any woman on the face of this earth.

Yet even Marcus Cunningham, of whom this character was substantially correct, had his vulnerable point. He was capable of marrying Rachel Brabberstone from every motive under the sun save that of affection; but he was utterly powerless—much as he honestly desired to do so—to expunge the image of Elizabeth from his innermost heart. She was the only woman who had ever touched his higher nature, or awakened the more generous springs of his being; and to his dying day she would probably never be dethroned from the place she occupied in his estimation.

Had Lady Arthur Millbanke been aware of this, she might not possibly have advised Lady Ingram to invite him to Torrington House.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AT CROSS PURPOSES.

MARCUS CUNNINGHAM drove Rachel down to Torrington House on the following Saturday morning in a hired carriage. Rachel's maid sat opposite to them, Mr Cunningham's valet was beside the coachman on the box, and the lady's dress basket and the gentleman's portmanteau rested confidently together upon the roof of the vehicle. There was no false shame whatever about this couple of lovers; they might have passed for a bride and a bridegroom starting together upon the first stage of their nuptial bliss. But it is a curious fact that this idea did not occur to either of them, although it may very likely have suggested itself to the lady's maid.

They were far too practical to be troubled by such notions. At first they talked a little very rationally and sensibly, and without any agitation whatever. Their conversation was chiefly about last night's division, and the forthcoming debate on Monday, in which Marcus expected to take an active part, and in which he had the satisfaction of seeing that she was now far more interested than she had been a month ago.

After a time they got tired of talking, and lapsed into silence. Rachel yawned, and lay back in her corner with closed eyes, and Marcus settled himself down to his newspapers. They found the drive very long and tedious, and did not hesitate to say so.

Rachel's father and mother were to go down to Brabberstone to-day. On Monday she was to return to London to the house of a maiden aunt in Bayswater, in order to finish the preparations for her trousseau. After that she would join her parents at home, there to wait until her wedding-day.

She was quite resigned to it all, and the trousseau had been a great amusement to her. Sometimes she wished it was all over, and the door well closed for ever and ever upon her past. And yet the past somehow had been lulled into sleep within her.

She had no thought of altering what she believed to be unalterable as the heavens above her. She tried not to think about herself at all, but about her plighted husband, who trusted her and believed in her, and whose earthly happiness was, she conceived, certainly bound up in her.

There was a time when she might have braced herself up to be true to herself and to her own higher nature; when she might have stood up alone and faced the whole world for the sake of her love, but she had not had the courage to do it, and

now the time was gone by. It was too late. She had made her own bed and now she must lie on it.

To-day, as they drove down thus prosaically together to spend their Sunday with Lady Ingram, she even told herself that all was for the best.

"He suits me perfectly. He is not a very demonstrative lover certainly, but that is all the better, and no doubt his feelings are deep. Cold-mannered persons, I have been told, have deep-seated affections." This, by the way, is an utter fallacy, but Rachel was anxious to believe in the delusion. "He does not, at all events, expect too much from me, and he is always considerate and gentlemanlike."

They were both unfeignedly glad when the carriage drew up before the colonnaded façade of Torrington House, and caught sight of Elizabeth, in a cool white cotton dress, standing upon the doorstep to meet them.

She looked in this simple costume so unlike the Lady Ingram of fashionable society, and so like the little Elizabeth Bertram of old days, that Cunningham's heart gave a great leap within him when he saw her; all the lost hopes of his life seemed to rise up mockingly before his eyes, as he held her small white hand between his own, and looked into the face where a certain vague shadow of wistful sadness took him back still more to that short summer week long ago, which he told himself that he had never ceased to regret.

"How hot you look, you poor things! Come in and have some lunch, and all manner of iced drinks, which are awaiting you." Elizabeth was Lady Ingram once more, with her pretty little hostess ways, and her happy knack of making everyone feel at home, and at ease in her house.

Cunningham was not altogether sure that he was glad to see Lady Arthur's gold-tinted head bending by the side of the invalid's chair as they entered the dining-room where lunch was already served; he was always on his guard with that lady, and suspected that she had made a very shrewd guess at the peculiar interest which he took in Lady Ingram. He pretended, however, to be delighted to see her, and they shook hands with much cordiality.

"I thought, of course, that you were yachting with Lord Arthur," he observed, as he took his seat at the table, not without a faint malice in the words; "how is it that you are not on the 'Cinderella'?"

"Simply because I suffer from sea sickness," replied Blanche quietly; "and also because I have other plans for myself."

"Ah, you have your own little game, I daresay," laughed Mr Cunningham.

"Yes, I have a very interesting little game, thanks, and one that I mean to play out to the end," she retorted defiantly.

Elizabeth was talking to Rachel: neither of them heard the little cross-fire of words.

"Are you lucky at games?" asked Marcus, with apparent indifference. "Or, don't you mind being beaten?—that, after all, is of the most importance."

"I mind being beaten very much—that is why I don't intend to be beaten."

Sir James spoke across the table to Rachel.

"Where are your parents, my dear?"

"They have gone back to Brabberstone, Sir James."

"Oh; and when are you going to be married? I hear it is to be very soon. I must get well by then, to come and see you turned off. Is the day decided upon yet?"

Rachel laughed, and blushed a little too, at the openness of this appeal, and referred Sir James to Mr Cunningham.

"It all depends upon him, and upon this wretched Parliament," she replied. "I have nothing to say to it."

"We shall be married in the first week of September, I hope, Sir James," said Cunningham.

Lady Arthur ate her quail in aspic with a smile of satisfaction. Elizabeth chattered away gaily, asking Rachel numberless questions about her frocks. She was a little flushed and excited, and behaved absolutely as if she had not a care in the world beyond natural anxiety about her husband's appetite.

Blanche congratulated herself upon the wisdom of the visit. The little interchange of hostilities had evidently no serious meaning. She had meant to say to him,—*"You had better take care."* He, no doubt, had merely wished to reply,—*"You have nothing to be in arms about."*

The marriage was evidently to be, and that so shortly that the lovers were unable to ignore their claims upon one another. All was as it should be: Elizabeth would recognise the hopeless folly of her sinful heart, and Marcus Cunningham, absorbed in necessary attention to his chosen bride, would take no notice of her whatever.

Yet long before the end of lunch, which passed off quite gaily and merrily, Marcus had come to the conclusion that Lady Ingram's spirits were forced,—that her colour was due not to health but to agitation, and that she was in reality wretchedly thin and worn.

And as he loved her, he drew his own conclusions.

Londoners who come out of the hot streets in August to spend a blessed thirty-six hours in cool country shades, are not, as a rule, anxious to exert themselves. To drive or to walk, or to run about in the sun after tennis balls, is not, I take it, the immediate desire of those parched souls, whose thirsty eyes are bent only on drinking in the peaceful verdure of the trees and the grass, and whose heated brows only long to be fanned by sweet-scented breezes wafted from a thousand flowers around them.

To sit still in the shade and do nothing is all that your visitor from London requires or desires during these his first hours of emancipation from the stuffiness and noise of the streets to which he has been condemned for so many weary days. No other amusement is wanted, no more elaborate entertainment need be provided. Low, red-cushioned straw chairs being conveniently placed upon the lawn under the shadow of a far-spreading maple tree, our friends migrated to them after lunch, and remained in them perfectly contented during the rest of the afternoon.

The scent of mignonette and white pinks came in whiffs from the flower-beds below them, the leaves of the maple rustled soothingly in the gentle breeze, birds sang faintly amongst the branches overhead, and tiny blue and yellow butterflies and lazy droning bees whizzed past in the sunshine, or nestled restfully in the hearts of the roses.

It was like, yet oh, how widely unlike! that other summer afternoon long ago, when Marcus had found Elizabeth sleeping in her chair upon the lawn, and when he had stooped down and awakened her from her maiden dreams into all the tragedy as well as all the joy of her womanhood.

Amongst all the chatter—Rachel describing her “going away” dress, and Lady Arthur inquiring about the guests that were to be at the Castle; amidst the scraps of gossip told from one to the other, fragments of news read out from the society papers that lay upon the table, or foolish yet laughable little jokes quoted from the pink-tinted pages of that curiously popular little newspaper which is to be met with in every house in England on a Saturday afternoon; amidst questions and answers, fretful requests from the poor paralyzed man in his bath chair, and interruptions from the servants bringing out coffee and cigarettes, and clattering away with empty cups and glasses; above it all, and amidst it all, Marcus Cunningham thought about that day almost incessantly during the afternoon. He wondered if Elizabeth thought about it too. Now and then he glanced furtively at his hostess as she sat on a low chair by

her husband's side, holding his hand in hers. Nothing could be more wifely and devoted than her attitude and her manner, and yet, by a subtle instinct of divination, Marcus felt perfectly certain that she too was reminded of that other most eventful day of their life.

Why had he not let her sleep? that was what he said to himself now. If only he had crept away as he had come, softly and noiselessly, and had left her to her dreams, how much of after sorrow he might have spared her! how incalculable a future of woe might he not himself have been free of!

Man-like, he blamed life, fate, luck, the perversity of human events, and the unreliable nature of unforeseen contingencies,—anything and everything, in short, sooner than himself and the accursed spirit of ambition and self-interest which had made it seem a right and beautiful thing that he should turn his back upon true happiness, and desert the woman who loved him, and whose affections he had gone out of his way to secure. And now he was paying for it bitterly and to the full. For the love that he had thought that he had so cleverly crushed and extinguished, had risen up again hydra-headed, a living, breathing reality, with a strength and vitality which was an amazement to himself, grinding down his very soul with a vain and hopeless despair. He himself bound to wed another woman within a month, and Elizabeth divided from him by marriage vows, from which only death could release her!

Nothing could be more hopeless. And yet he knew not why nor wherefore, but assuredly there existed hope of some sort or other in the depths of his heart. He did not indeed know what he hoped for—yet it seemed to him there was something,—something which, in spite of all the warnings of prudence and discretion, had brought him here to-day, into her very presence, and under her very roof,—into the jaws too of a woman who more than half saw through him, and who had seemingly pledged her clever self to defend the woman he loved against himself.

"I was a fool to come," he said to himself. And yet he was glad that he was here. He had run into danger with his eyes wide open, and yet the danger was passing sweet.

And so in apparent harmony, in light discourse, in playful gossip, and in gentle badinage, the summer afternoon wore away, and no outer sign was given of those passions of human nature which below the surface of life's outer garb burnt and raged secretly in the hearts of more than one of the actors in this pleasant little garden scene.

Nothing happened till after dinner, save sundry small and

unremarkable things which bore but faintly upon the issues at stake.

Of these, the only one worth recording was the arrival at seven o'clock of a hansom bringing down two men from town to dinner. One of these was the very gentleman whom some two months ago Marcus had overheard discussing Lady Ingram's character and proceedings in the smoking-room of the Carlton Club. He was a clerk in the Foreign Office, and was handsome in person and agreeable in manners, notwithstanding the fact that he had been made much more of in society than he justly merited, by reason of a pretty tenor voice and a fashion of singing De Lara's charming love songs with a peculiar emphasis and intensity which rendered him popular with the ladies.

Mr Stanley Hall was in fact looked upon as an acquisition in a drawing-room; and showed perhaps somewhat too plainly that he considered himself to be so.

His companion was one of those delightful "dining-out" bachelors, between forty and fifty years of age, who are of such inestimable value in helping out the dull commonplaceness of ordinary dinner-table conversation.

Mr Fullalowe could discourse upon every subject under the sun—politics, science, art, religion, and dramatic *on dits*, ran in succession with equal glibness off the end of his tongue. Whilst professing to have private sources of information concerning the state secrets of Europe, and bursting with the confidences of half a dozen foreign ambassadors, his great soul was at the same time not above descending to the smallest details of domestic and social life. He knew everything and everybody, could tell you whom you ought to know, and who had better be left unknown; was up to all the marriages and intermarriages, to say nothing of the broken-off matches, prospective engagements, and possible divorce cases that were likely to trouble the peace and excite the minds of the upper crust of this wicked world for the next six months.

Mr Fullalowe was seldom ill-natured, but he was a walking encyclopædia of gossip; he was always brimful of news, and bristling with important secrets, which he confided impartially in audible whispers to all his best friends. But although he frequently in this way made a great deal of mischief quite unintentionally and inadvertently, yet, oddly enough, he hardly ever made a mistake. Upon this fact he somewhat prided himself. "My prestige would be gone," he would say, "if I ever make an unfounded assertion." And it is but justice to say that he never did so.

There was nobody in the world whom Mr Fullalowe admired and liked so much as Lady Arthur Millbanke. She was his beau-ideal of womanhood, and he was always immensely interesting to her. They had tastes in common, and with each the harmless pleasure of occupying themselves with their neighbours' affairs, in a pure spirit of philanthropy and kindness, was raised from an ignoble weakness into almost the dignity of a virtue.

No sooner did Mr Fullalowe and Lady Arthur catch sight of each other, than their "spirits rushed together" in a fervour of passionate delight. The gentleman was full of confidences to impart, the lady full of eagerness to receive them. The consequence was, that they became completely absorbed in one another, to the absolute oblivion of everybody else.

This happy state of things lasted throughout dinner. Sir James, not feeling equal to the fatigue of dining with his guests, the little party was reduced to six. Mr Fullalowe and Lady Arthur kept each other amused and alive by mutual reminiscences, and by a whole string of new and original stories. Lady Ingram devoted herself to the Foreign Office clerk, whilst Marcus and Rachel were naturally left to one another.

Blanche was far too pleasantly employed to notice how sullen and gloomy Marcus Cunningham grew by degrees, as the courses succeeded each other, or how few and far between were the desultory remarks which the lovers exchanged; nor had she the time, amidst the brilliant flow of her companion's interesting revelations, to awake to the fact that Elizabeth was in a dangerously excited state, and that her spirits and her laughter alike were forced and unnatural. Lady Ingram looked her best. She was dressed entirely in white, and the carmine flush upon her cheeks, and the animation of her eyes, contrasted almost strangely with the dead pallor of her draperies. She was bent upon making herself agreeable to Mr Stanley Hall, and that young gentleman, misled by the effusion of her manner and the sweetness of her smiles, not unnaturally began to believe that his lovely hostess was deeply interested in himself.

Being a young man of much self-assurance and of considerable experience, the Foreign Office clerk was not at all slow in responding to her attentions; and, bending across the corner of the table between them, in his most effective and languishing manner, he fixed his brown velvet eyes admiringly, and with a certain audacity, upon her animated face. Elizabeth, in point of fact, did not discourage him in the very least; there was that tempest of misery and despair within her heart which renders an impulsive woman reckless and foolhardy. To flirt with this foolish and conceited young man seemed a natural

outlet for the storm of passion within her. By nature she was not a flirt, but to-night it seemed to her a weapon placed in her hands against the wretchedness of her fate.

She flirted with Mr Stanley Hall desperately and outrageously, and the consequence was that Marcus became first sullen, then angry, and lastly furiously and unreasonably jealous.

Rachel sat by, understanding but very little of what was going on, yet feeling vaguely puzzled and uneasy. She could not tell what made Marcus so curt in his answers, and so ungracious in his manner towards her ; it was not at all like him, neither was it like Elizabeth to evince such overweening delight in the society of an empty-headed and good-looking young man. Elizabeth, who had been so much admired, had always been discreet and sensible in her dealings with the men who had flocked about her ; she had invariably been sweet and gracious to all, but she had never betrayed unseemly preferences for any one in particular, or been carried off her balance by the flattery and worship of any one of her adorers.

Rachel could not imagine why she should apparently have set herself to work to turn poor Mr Stanley Hall's head.

And Lady Arthur, who could have read it all like a book, was so much taken up with Mr Fullalowe's good stories, that she saw nothing at all !

It was a beautiful moonlight night ; as soon as dinner was over, Lady Ingram proposed an adjournment to the garden. The gentlemen promised not to linger over their coffee, and Elizabeth and Lady Arthur went out at once on to the terrace. Rachel went upstairs to fetch a wrap, as she was afraid of the night air.

She rang the bell for her maid, as she could not lay her hand upon the particular black lace shawl she wanted. Her room looked on to the side of the house, and whilst she waited, she leant on the window-sill and looked out with delight at the still beauty of the harvest moon flooding the gardens below. There were deep masses of shadow beneath the clumps of evergreens upon the lawn, and beyond, between an opening in the trees, the small weed-covered pond lay like a shining emerald in the moonbeams.

Suddenly, as Rachel watched, two figures emerged from behind the shadowy belt of shrubbery, and stood in strong relief against the water beyond. She had no difficulty in recognising Marcus in the man, he was so much taller than either of the two other men, that, even had his broad-shouldered figure not been so familiar to her, she could not by any possibility have mistaken him for anyone else.

But the woman at his side was a preplexity to her ; her dress appeared to be white, and she had wound a white fleecy shawl about her head and shoulders. It might certainly be Elizabeth, but then Lady Arthur's gown of palest blue would have looked equally white in the uncertain light.

Rachel did not know why, but her heart began to beat in a strange and unwonted fashion. There was something in the way in which these two persons whom she was watching stood still upon the path to speak to one another, which was not according to the usual manner in which a lady and gentleman enjoy an ordinary after-dinner stroll together.

They stood facing one another a few feet apart ; no sound of their voices reached her from that distance, and yet by certain gestures and movements of their head and hands she could tell that their conversation was of deep earnestness and gravity. If it was Lady Arthur who was with Marcus, then their long standing acquaintance would account for some serious topic having arisen between them—but if it was Lady Ingram—what then did it mean ?

Like a long-forgotten dream there came back to Rachel's memory the dinner-party at Brabberstone, on the eve of the election, when she had playfully congratulated little Elizabeth Bertram upon her conquest of the Conservative candidate, and when, at the dance that followed, she had been somewhat surprised to see that he had danced with her more than once. And then her mother had sent Elizabeth home, and, later on, had seemed to keep the girl out of Marcus Cunningham's way. Had there been any meaning in all this ?

Rachel saw Cunningham reach out his hand to his companion, and saw that she turned suddenly away from him with a gesture that looked like anger ; then they went slowly away together down the pathway by the green surfaced pool into the shadow of the overhanging branches, the gleam of the long white draperies shining dimly through the deepening gloom.

The maid was waiting behind her with her black lace shawl ; she wrapped it hastily about her head and shoulders, and went down into the garden, passing out not through the drawing-rooms, but by a side doorway through the conservatory. Her face was on fire, her heart beat with so strange a mixture of hope and apprehension that she could not analyse what she experienced. Only—she meant to know.

She was entirely in black from head to foot. No one could have seen her as she went swiftly yet stealthily down the garden, keeping to the shadows of the great clumps of rhodo-

dendrons, and avoiding as far as possible the brilliant patches of moonlight that lay between them.

Presently she heard footsteps coming towards her along the path by the water side.

Marcus and his companion were coming back. Quick as thought Rachel stepped behind the shelter of a large laurestinus bush, and waited for them.

CHAPTER XXX

EAVESDROPPING.

It was Lady Ingram's white silk dress that came rustling towards her across the tiny pebbles on the path, gleaming like a pale reflection of the moonshine through the trees, and it was Lady Ingram's voice that first struck upon Rachel's ears, up-lifted in tones of passionate denial.

"No, no, no!" she cried, striking her hands one within the other. "You have no right, none whatever; a thousand times I deny it! What I do, and what I say, what has it to do with you?"

They stopped short, standing again face to face to one another, as they had done before upon the lawn. Rachel was so close to them both, that by putting out a hand either of them might have touched her.

Marcus spoke in a low voice, sorrowfully, imploringly.

"Elizabeth, do not be so horribly angry with me! Oh, yes, I confess I have no right. I was a fool to say that I had, and doubly a fool to be stupidly jealous of that brainless young ass. It was unworthy of me, I own; as unworthy as it was of you to do your best to drive me into this madness, for you meant to do it—Oh, yes, I know very well that you meant it! But forgive me, I beg of you; you should make some allowance for me, knowing, as you do, how utterly wretched I am."

"Why should you be wretched? You have everything surely,—everything to make you happy."

The anger had suddenly gone out of her voice, it was only a little broken and uncertain, and the words came haltingly and as if with difficulty from her lips.

"Oh, everything, of course!" he echoed derisively. "So my father says! so everybody tells me! I am born under a lucky star, they say! Success tumbles naturally into my mouth. I have made a hit in life, and I am going to make a highly desirable marriage! I ought to be happy, ought I not?"

and he laughed scornfully, kicking away a loose pebble upon the path with his foot.

"Do not speak like that: it distresses me," she answered quickly, in a voice of pain. "Remember that your marriage is one of choice and of inclination, and that Rachel is as good as she is beautiful. I cannot find any pity for you, Marcus!"

In the dim light she could see, and Rachel who watched could see too, the passion and the hunger of misery in his eyes.

Suddenly he drew her towards him, seizing her hands in his own, with a swift and passionate gesture.

"Elizabeth," he cried brokenly, "how is it that *you*, who know so well, can repeat these empty and senseless platitudes!" Then as suddenly as he had taken them, he dropped her hands again, and turned away from her, with a gesture of hopeless dejection. "And yet, yes, of course, you are right! Rachel is, as you say, good and beautiful, and to Rachel I am bound, so unalterably bound that I cannot free myself. I am going to marry her, Elizabeth, to marry her, you know that! and I shall do my duty to my wife before God and man. But do you suppose that for all her goodness, and for all her beauty, that I can compel myself to love her?—I, who love *you*, Elizabeth, only *you*, *you*, in all the world?"

"You should not—you should not say it!" she said, amidst a rain of tears that rushed in a blinding flood to her eyes.

"No—I should not! But can one command love! Can one say I *will* love this person, because it is right; and I will *not* love this other person, because it is wrong? Since the world began has one man or one woman ever been able to subdue love to reason, or to barricade the heart against it? You know, as well as I do, that it is impossible! Every claim of sense and of duty may urge that to love Rachel is a necessity of my life, and yet—and yet—I love *you*!—*you* who are as far out of my reach as the stars above our heads!"

His voice—that had been strong and passionate with all the fervour of a long pent-up emotion—dropped into a sad, low whisper, so faint, so tremulous, that the silent listener, straining every nerve to hear the last words, could not entirely catch the sound of the sorrowful accents.

"You did not always say so!" murmured Elizabeth.

And then Marcus Cunningham sighed. Perhaps no one on earth had ever heard him sigh before. He, who was so cold, and wise, and sensible, who thought so much of this world and its pitiful maxims, who had scorned for so long the promptings of his better nature!"

"No," he said sadly; "and is not that my bitterest punish-

ment? I, whom you loved—whom you love still—ah! do not deny it, dear—I might, had I been truer, have won what now I have lost for ever! Elizabeth, in losing you, I know now that my one chance of goodness and singleness of heart was lost as well. For every soul on earth, it is said, there exists one fellow-soul, made to be the true complement of the other, to call forth all the latent goodness, and to subdue all the latent evil. Many live and die and never meet that twin essence of their being. But I—I have met it, and I was so blind that I turned my back upon it, thrusting it away from me with my own hands for ever. Ah! cannot you then find it in your heart to pity me?"

"For Heaven's sake," she answered distractedly; "do not talk in this miserable fashion! What is, cannot be undone; and it would be more manly, surely, to accept the unalterable, and to bear it bravely. Is not my lot harder than yours? You have Rachel—"

"Rachel! Rachel!" he repeated bitterly. "When you speak to me of her, I almost think that I hate her!"

There was a rustling movement in the thick bushes behind them; it was Rachel, who had risen swiftly and had fled.

"Hush! Did you hear?" whispered Elizabeth.

"It was nothing but the wind amongst the branches," he answered carelessly. "But I must take you back, Elizabeth. I have kept you out too long. And now I will be reasonable, and brave, and manly as you tell me to be, and I will say no more to pain you." They moved slowly on together out into the moonlight. "Only I will not stay with you any longer. After luncheon to-morrow I shall go away. The ordeal is too terrible. I ought never to have come, for my presence only troubles you. It would have been wiser to have kept away from you; but, when you asked me to come, then I felt I did not know how to refuse. But now I have seen you and told you the truth, I will try to keep out of your way. You have your duty to the poor old man who clings to you and loves you—and I—I shall have my duty to my wife. We shall be best apart, and this night—this is our good-bye!"

Elizabeth was weeping silently.

When they came close to the house, she stopped, and put forth her trembling hands; he took them, and pressed them quietly to his lips. It was indeed the moment of an eternal farewell: both of them felt it to be so.

"God bless you!" she murmured; and then, with a sudden change of manner, she added more lightly, "and I will not vex you any more by flirting with Mr Stanley Hall!"

The little tender jest, so womanly and so pitiful in its sweet humility, touched him to the very heart. He turned away abruptly and left her, and Elizabeth passed swiftly through the long muslin curtains into the drawing-room window.

Sir James in his invalid-chair sat by the empty fireplace; Lady Arthur was embroidering a white satin sachet under the lamp-light; Mr Fullalowe was still relating his "very latest" in a subdued whisper into her down-bent ears; and Mr Stanley Hall was disconsolately trolling forth "After Silent Years" by himself at the piano.

Elizabeth came in a little dazed and bewildered. She had hastily wiped away the tears from her cheeks as she entered, and now she paused, and divested herself of her white shawl. The lamp-light blinded her eyes for a few minutes after the tender radiance of the moonshine without; and the sudden change from the passionate reality of her life to the commonplace little scene before her, dazzled and confused her. A moment ago, *that* had been real, and *this* but a hollow mockery; now this, the lamp-light, the figures by the table, the crippled man who was her husband, the voice of the singer at the piano, all this seemed to be the truth, and the other but an empty dream that was already past and over.

Slowly she came forward into the midst of them, into the circle of the yellow light. Sir James held out a feeble hand to her, with the murmured welcome of an endearing word; Lady Arthur looked up sharply; Mr Fullalowe rose politely to make way for her; and the man at the piano sang on serenely:—

"To love it is hard, and 'tis harder,
Perchance to be loved again."

The words went through her heart like a knife. She shivered a little as she went by.

"Where is Rachel?" asked Blanche, as she passed her; "is she not with you?"

She shook her head.

"I do not know," she murmured, and then she went and knelt at her husband's side, and took his hand between her own.

She was dazed and stunned, but she was not altogether unhappy, because, however good and true a woman may be, it can never be anything but a pure joy to her to hear from the lips of the man she loves the words "I love you!" They are words that bear with them, in spite of sorrow and despair, an intrinsic sweetness, and the spring as of ever-living delight, of which nothing on earth can rob them.

But what Elizabeth said to herself as she lifted her husband's

shrivelled hand to her lips was what every good woman in her place would have said too.

"This is my duty; here lies my life! I am necessary to this man, who has given me his name, and by God's help I will not fail him."

And so she grew stronger, and better able to fight with her own rebel heart; and it seemed to her that she need never give in or fall beneath her burthen, as long as she had this strong incentive left to her.

For the second time in her life Elizabeth tried to choose the narrow path of duty that is set about with thorns and brambles, and to find happiness as well as right within its tortuous lines—for the second time perchance even duty itself was destined to fail her!

And upstairs Rachel Brabberstone lay face downwards upon her bed. She was not in tears, she was not unhappy even; only all at once life seemed to have inverted its whole current. Her destiny was shattered, her future literally turned upside down. All that she had thought and believed and stood fast by, had suddenly failed her, and, like the shifting surface of some treacherous quicksand, had slipped away into nothingness out of her grasp.

No doubt her pride, her vanity even, had received a severe and bitter blow; and at the first the pain which she experienced was so real and intense that she could scarcely weigh the measure and the quality of her suffering.

By-and-by, however, as she lay quite still and voiceless prone upon her bed, she began, as most of us do in the greatest crisis of our lives, to dissect herself and her own sensations.

She was aware of a dull wounded pain, something which affected her head more strongly than her heart, and of a complete *bouleversement* of her whole nature. She had trusted, and she had been deceived; she had sacrificed herself to a false sense of right and of duty, and her sacrifice had been thrown away unappreciated and unheeded. In short, she had made a horrible and fearful mistake!

When she came to this conclusion, she sat up on the bed and passed her hand bewilderedly across her eyes. There was no light, only the moonshine that came in through the wide open windows flooding the whole room with a cold brightness. She sat very still and quiet for a little space, trying to collect her thoughts, and to disentangle from one another the conflicting emotions that seemed to tear her in two; and presently her lips almost unconsciously breathed forth in a whisper that half frightened herself the words,—

"Thank God, it is not too late!"

And thereupon there came surging up within her such a wild delirium of joy, such a very passion of love and delight, that in the revulsion of her feelings she threw her face back upon her pillows, and cried aloud in the darkness to herself,—

"Oh, Vere, Vere! my love—my true, true love!"

For that was what Marcus Cunningham's horrible self-revelation meant to Rachel Brabberstone; a sudden unblinding of her eyes, a tearing asunder of all the sham bonds and toils in which she had believed herself to be so tightly entangled, and a new-born courage and resolution whose magnitude and whose strength seemed almost to take her breath away.

What she had listened to amongst the shadows of the moonlight garden meant to Rachel—freedom, love, and Vere Sherwood!

It had come to her at last,—come to her with such a force that she could no longer shut her heart and her ears to it, and it had not come too late!

No wonder, then, that she cried aloud, "Thank God!" out of the very depths of her thankful heart.

Presently she sprang to her feet, full of new purpose and eager for action. She lit her candles; she rang her bell. When the maid came, she sent her down with a message to Lady Ingram that she had a headache, and that she would not come downstairs again. Then when the girl returned, she said to her,—

"You must pack my things to-night, and you must arrange for a fly to be here to take me back to town early to-morrow. I am feverish to-night—I may be going to be ill; I think I will go back to my aunt's house at once."

If the maid marvelled, she was too well-trained to express her surprise, and she proceeded quietly to fulfil her mistress's orders.

She sent a little three-cornered note in to Elizabeth's room, early in the morning, to the same effect; and by the time the note was delivered, she was half-way down the road outside the grounds in her fly, with her luggage on the top.

Lady Ingram was both puzzled and annoyed by this strange and incomprehensible conduct. Blanche Millbanke was annoyed, but she was not puzzled; and as for Cunningham—what he thought matters but little—what he did was simple enough. He said nothing more at all about going away after lunch, but remained on quietly where he was until the Monday morning.

The astute Lady Arthur was exceedingly uneasy. Something, she felt sure, had gone wrong. What it was she could

not discover. She questioned Elizabeth, but Elizabeth could give her no information.

"How can I tell you what has made her behave in such an extraordinary way!" she said angrily. "People don't fall ill in that mysterious fashion, and then run away! It is, of course, nothing but an excuse; and I consider it extremely rude of Rachel—I shall not forgive her easily."

"My dear, that is, of course, what I think—her being ill is nothing but an excuse; but then there must be some reason! What happened last night? Did you have any little quarrel with her after dinner?"

"When I have told you, Blanche, that I never set eyes upon her after we got up from dinner!" cried Elizabeth irritably.

Then Lady Arthur attacked Marcus.

"What have you said or done to drive Rachel away?" she said to him. "It looks very bad, you know, to have lovers' quarrels at this stage of your engagement."

"I have had no quarrel with her," replied the young man. "I know no more than you do what has induced her to behave so strangely, and to treat Lady Ingram with such scant civility."

Lady Arthur began to put two and two together in her clever head.

"They neither of them know anything—they neither of them saw her! That does not, however, prove at all that Rachel is without knowledge, or without eyesight! If I am not much mistaken, Rachel either saw or overheard more than was meant for her eyes and ears. Mr Marcus Cunningham has been at his old games again; Rachel has been warned in time; but it is my poor Elizabeth who will be the sufferer. Why did not I watch over her better? fool that I was! It is that silly, gabbling old Fullalowe who took me off my guard with his inane histories, just at a time when of all others I ought to have looked after her the most! I wish to goodness he and his tales had been at Jericho!"

This, after all the interest and amusement which Fullalowe had afforded her last night, was, no doubt, a singular display of base ingratitude on Lady Arthur's part, but an angry woman is generally unreasonable in her resentments, and is ever prone to wreak her displeasure upon innocent persons. Lady Arthur could barely bring herself to be decently civil to the unfortunate Fullalowe to-day, whilst he on his part was quite at a loss to understand in what manner he had forfeited her good graces; and he exhausted himself throughout the whole of that Sabbath Day in vain endeavours to reinstate himself into her favour.

But Lady Arthur had serious business on hand, and was not to be mollified. From morning till night she never let Lady Ingram out of her sight.

She might have saved herself the trouble ; for neither Elizabeth nor Marcus had any desire to embark again into the perils of a *tête-à-tête*. A word or two indeed had passed between them after they rose from the breakfast-table.

Standing in the embrasure of one of the tall windows, Marcus had come for one moment to her side.

"She must have listened," he said, shortly and scornfully.

"Did I not tell you I heard some one behind us in the trees," she answered rapidly, and with distress.

"It is her own fault," he muttered angrily.

"Hush ! If I have spoilt your future, how can I ever forgive myself ? It will be an eternal remorse to me !"

"Oh !" he answered, with a scornful shrug of his shoulders. "Do not distress yourself. Rachel will come round ; she is not likely to take things *au grand sérieux*. It is to her interest to forgive me. I shall go and make my peace to-morrow, and I shall be forgiven !"

There are, however, some offences which the most long-suffering amongst women is unable to pardon.

The next morning Marcus Cunningham went back to town.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RACHEL IN EXILE.

TWENTY-FOUR hours later the murder was out. There appeared a brief paragraph in the pages of the *Morning Post*, and two letters were duly delivered each to their respective destination.

The announcement was as follows :—

"We are authorised to state that the marriage arranged between Marcus Cunningham, Esq., M.P., only son of Sir Frederick Cunningham, Baronet, and the Honourable Rachel Brabberstone, only daughter of Lord Brabberstone, will not take place."

The first and shorter letter ran thus :—

"50 CRAVEN GARDENS BAYSWATER.

"DEAR MARCUS,—I was in the garden on Saturday night, and overheard a part of your conversation with Lady Ingram. You will understand therefore that it is impossible that I can become your wife. I am very thankful that you have found out your mistake in time, and that a future of certain misery is spared to us both. I shall always be your friend, and I trust

that you will not cease to regard me with kindly feelings.—
Yours sincerely, RACHEL BRABBERSTONE."

The second was addressed to Lord Brabberstone.

"MY DEAR FATHER,—I am afraid that what I am going to say will cause you and my mother a great deal of grief. I have broken off my engagement. Mr Cunningham and I have found out, before it is too late, that we have mistaken our feelings for one another; a marriage between us has therefore become impossible. My chief sorrow lies in the knowledge of your displeasure and disappointment: for this reason I have decided to remain for the present with Aunt Dudley, as I am sure it will be better for me not to come home for a few months. We stay in town for another fortnight, and then we shall go down to Ramsgate or Folkestone for a month—aunt has not yet decided which, but I will let you know our address as soon as she has settled. I hope, my dear father, that you will forgive me, and try to believe that what has occurred is for the true happiness of your affectionate child
RACHEL."

When these two letters had been written and posted, and the *Morning Post* had duly inserted the notice she had sent simultaneously with the letters, in its column of fashionable intelligence, Rachel felt as if a great load had been removed from her heart. The deed was done; her decision had been taken; there was no going back now, nor was any further vacillation and uncertainty possible to her.

She awaited the answers from Marcus and her father with some anxiety but with little trepidation. For when we have made up our own minds to a certain course of action, half the terror and the anguish of the plunge is over. It is the mind divided against itself, the battle within, the conflicting throes of uncertainty of purpose, in which lie most of the horrors of apprehension. Once let our own purpose be firm, and our own will irrevocably fixed, and the condemnation and anger of others will have lost their power to disturb and dismay us.

Rachel—who had been so weak and uncertain, who had feared so much to be true, and to whom the opinion of her world had seemed so insuperable a barrier between herself and her happiness—realised all at once that her courage and her desperation had brought with them their own reward. Strength had come to her to act, and with action fearlessness had followed.

Marcus Cunningham's answer was short and exceedingly polite. He regretted her decision, but he bowed to it; he agreed with her that their engagement had been a mistake, but he implied that the ending of it was entirely her own doing. He

expressed no desire to see her again, nor any anxiety to shake her determination, and he signed himself her very sincere friend.

Her father's letter was less satisfactory. Lord Brabberstone was excessively angry, and his anger ran freely and unreservedly from the end of his pen. He pretty well cursed his daughter for her folly, and ordered her to reconcile herself at once to her lover, or else live for ever under the ban of his own just displeasure. He reviled her for ingratitude to her parents, and railed at her for rebellion against the Almighty. He bade her send telegrams at once to Marcus, to Sir Frederick, and to himself, stating that she had changed her mind, and would abide by her engagement, and he ended up by saying that if she did not do so, and repent and retract, she was welcome to go with Aunt Dudley either to Ramsgate or to the Infernal Regions, and to remain there as long as she pleased.

It was a violent and angry letter from a violently angry man. Rachel shivered a little as she read it, for her father had always hitherto been kind and affectionate to her; and then she took the wisest course, tore it up at once, and tried to forget it.

There was a letter from Lady Brabberstone, too, less angry but even more bitterly reproachful, appealing to her affection and to her sense of honour; setting forth all the disgrace and the publicity, as well as all the wasted glories of trousseau and presents,—the humiliation in the eyes of friends, and the parental grey hairs which would infallibly be brought to their untimely tombs. Rachel smiled a little scornfully to herself as she tore up this letter too, and wondered what further storm of abusive words would be forthcoming when—when—ah! when, perhaps something else would be announced at Brabberstone Castle! And so the scorn faded, and only a little tenderness in the smile remained.

"It seems that you are likely to have a benefit of me!" she said to her aunt. "My father and mother are very angry. I shall not be welcome at home, I fear, for a very long time."

"My dear, you are very welcome to me," replied Aunt Dudley, who was partly in her niece's confidence, and who had old-fashioned ideas concerning the celestial manufacture of mundane matrimonial schemes.

Aunt Dudley was a character. She was a very old lady, and was Rachel's great-aunt, being a sister of Lady Brabberstone's mother. She had been a widow for so many dozens of years that no one living could remember her as anything else; and what manner of man the defunct Dudley had been during his earthly sojourn in this vale of tears, had long ago been lost to sight amongst the mists and traditions of extreme antiquity.

She never spoke of her husband nor of her married life, but there had been a nephew of Mr Dudley's to whom she had apparently been sincerely attached, and who had died of consumption some five-and-thirty years ago. This poor man's name was often on her lips, and his memory was still sacredly kept green within her withered heart.

The year that Charles died was, like the going up out of Egypt of the Israelites, the date of reference to all ulterior events of the good lady's life. This unfortunate young man, who would have been over fifty if he had lived, had been Mrs Dudley's heir, and she had never been persuaded to make a will since his loss. His death appeared to her almost in the light of a grievance.

"It was all to have gone to Charles," she would say fretfully, when sometimes her old friend and solicitor Mr Weeks ventured to hint to her the advisability of making some disposition of her property. "I had taken no end of trouble with that will. If he had lived, everything would have been satisfactory: it is a great annoyance to me to have the subject re-opened. I remember you spoke of it before, the summer I was at Richmond, five years after the year Charles died—"

Failing Charles deceased, it seemed to her impossible to enter into any other testamentary arrangements; and even the argument that her small fortune would necessarily be divided into at least fifty-three different portions of infinitesimal value, failed to move her to take any steps in the matter.

"I will not leave it to anybody unworthy," she would say,—"and since Charles died I have met with nobody else that is worthy—it had better be scattered about; it was to have been all Charles'. He should have been alive."

Nevertheless, Aunt Dudley, as she was called in the family—her Christian name, like her late husband, being one of those things that had become forgotten—Aunt Dudley was by no means a melancholy old lady. The memory of Charles and his unfortunate mistake in dying after she had made a will in his favour did not affect her spirits materially, beyond sundry references and reminiscences concerning the deceased young man, to which she was accustomed to allude with solemn and imperturbable gravity in the midst of ordinary conversation.

Red, for instance, was a colour that was abhorrent to her.

"The bed on which Charles died had red curtains to it," she would say simply. "You cannot expect me to wear red bonnet strings!"

Consequently everything of that particular colour was banished out of Aunt Dudley's house. She even objected to red

roses, and would order a pot of scarlet geraniums peremptorily out of the room.

For the same reason, neither muffins nor crumpets ever appeared upon her table.

"Charles had a horror of them," she would pathetically declare. "They always gave him indigestion, and he never could bear even to see me eat them."

And accordingly when the bell of the muffin man was to be heard down the street on a winter afternoon, Aunt Dudley would religiously cover her ears with her hands, so as to shut out the inharmonious sounds that renewed sad memories of her late nephew's attacks of indigestion.

Aunt Dudley's house was a gloomy enough abode ; nor was Craven Gardens a lively locality. With all due deference to that respectable quarter which is called Bayswater, and with profound apologies to such of my acquaintance as reside there, I am bound to declare that that particular district of London is not of a cheerful or animating character.

The long lines of stucco houses breathe but of unspeakable dulness, whilst the quiet and almost deserted terraces and squares oppress one with an unutterable depression. Life seems to go slower in that melancholy region. The heart of London, which beats so merrily and hotly elsewhere, seems to have no place there. The whirl and the tumult of the City's toil and the City's pleasure seem to have passed it by and forgotten it. It scarcely seems London at all indeed to those to whom London means Piccadilly ; and the very faces one meets along its dreary streets are strange and unfamiliar to the eyes of a pure-bred Cockney. Even in June Bayswater seems to be tranquil with the tranquillity that is not of peace but of stagnation ; whilst in the latter end of August, when all the decent houses are shuttered and empty, and all the "carriage people" out of town, then there is nothing left unto it save an appalling and devastating atmosphere of isolation, which broods over it as heavily as the clouds of a November fog.

Rachel, when her own little exciting crisis was past and over, began to find its dulness almost insupportable.

To live Aunt Dudley's life, in Aunt Dudley's sombre little house ; to sit in the morning in the drawing-room, with its faded green carpet and curtains and the orthodox double doors painted in streaky imitation maple wood, with the console glass and table against one wall, and the marble-topped mahogany chiffoneer against the other, with Aunt Dudley's fat old spaniel snoring on the hearth-rug, and Aunt Dudley's wool-work lying about on the sofa, and then to go out for a little

slow walk with the good old lady in the afternoon, through the dull streets and squares just as far as the Kensington Gardens and back again, was to her altogether a condition of trial and endurance.

She began to wonder whether Vere would make any sign,—whether he would come to her, or whether he would write. She found herself watching for the posts, and as day after day went slowly by, and nothing came from him, a sensation of sickening disappointment overcame her. She had taken the precaution of going to the empty family house in Grosvenor Street, in order to desire that her letters might be forwarded to her in Craven Gardens, and a good many bills were in consequence frequently dispatched to her; but beyond these doubtfully joyous missives, nothing of an interesting nature reached her.

It did not strike her—indeed so ignorant was she of the kind of life which Vere Sherwood led,—it did not even remotely cross her mind, that an announcement concerning a marriage in the *Morning Post* would be the very last thing that would be likely to meet his eyes. She imagined that so public an advertisement of her affairs was bound to come to his knowledge, for if he had missed it himself, some friend would surely mention it to him. She did not realise that neither Vere nor any of his friends were in the habit of interesting themselves in fashionable intelligence. At length she came to the conclusion that he must be away. A fortnight rolled slowly away, the weather became hotter, the baked streets were oppressively suffocating, even in the Kensington Gardens there seemed to be never a breath of fresh air.

Parliament was up, the last signs of life and animation gradually subsided, and London, like some great sleepy animal, settled herself down comfortably and drowsily into the two months of her annual autumn torpor.

Still Aunt Dudley could not quite make up her mind whether she would go to Ramsgate or to Folkestone.

Rachel suggested Weymouth, as offering a greater change and more tranquillity. But Aunt Dudley indignantly negatived the idea.

“Have I not often told you, Rachel, that poor Charles died at Bournemouth? How *can* I go to Weymouth?”

“My dear aunt, surely they are a very long way from each other?”

“What does that matter, when they both end in ‘mouth’? I cannot go to any ‘mouth’—Portsmouth, Teignmouth, Weymouth, they all have the same objection; the names bring back sad memories to me. I could never go to those places; and as Weymouth begins with W. there is a double drawback to it, as

poor Charles died in a villa called Waverley Villa. That is why I suggested Ramsgate. Gates are all safe, so are stones. I will go to Margate, if you like it better, or else to Folkestone, as I said before: there are no objections to either of those places."

The available sea-side towns along the South Coast being thus considerably limited, Ramsgate was finally decided upon, lodgings were engaged, and Aunt Dudley began to see about her packing up a full week before the day fixed upon for the journey.

Rachel was restless and ill at ease. She could not bear to think of going away, and yet she did not know what steps to take if she remained. One day conviction came to her upon one point. She saw Vere's name advertised to sing at one of the Promenade Concerts. He was therefore certainly in town. This knowledge made her still more unhappy. Why did he not understand that she was free? Why did he make no sign? What was he waiting for?

The impossibility of obtaining an answer to these questions filled her with despair. The barriers which divided her from him appeared to be more insurmountable than ever. A doubt began to enter her mind as to whether he cared for her still, and the difficulty of setting this doubt at rest, appeared to her to be greater than all else.

Then she remembered the last parting between them, and the words of the song which had been his farewell to her, and which had seemed to be branded in letters of fire upon her heart ever since.

"For life it is brimful of grief, love,
And love to be true must be brave;
And I know though I wish you good-bye, love,
I shall carry your heart to my grave!"

Oh, no, he had not ceased to love her—she could not believe it! She seemed to hear again the tones of his beautiful sorrow-laden voice, and the long wail of grief which he poured into the last notes of that terrible song. She seemed to see the blue eyes, hollow with reproach and misery, fixed upon her with a great sadness in them, and the lips which were a little cruel and scornful as they sang. He had loved her then, although he had thought badly of her—surely he must love her still!—it was but a short two months ago, and in two months does the love of a man, and of such a man too as Vere Sherwood, perish and die entirely?

She was standing one day by the drawing-room windows; she had just come in with her aunt from her little daily stroll. It was only five o'clock; the afternoon was still and sultry; there was no sunshine, only a bank of low brooding clouds, that seemed charged with a breezeless suffocation. It wanted

still two hours till dinner time. Rachel felt as if she would choke; she must have more air, more movement; how was she to sit still, in that tranquil old-world room, and pretend to read her book for a couple of hours, with all these wild and miserable thoughts tearing and raging at her within? She must walk, walk, walk! or how should she be able to sleep that night?

"Aunt Dudley," she said suddenly, turning round to the old lady, who was just settling down in her chair to doze until the dressing-bell rang, "Aunt Dudley, may I go out again for an hour?"

"By yourself, Rachel!" Aunt Dudley was a dreadful stickler for the proprieties. "I really hardly know; but perhaps Jane could put on her bonnet and go with you, my dear."

"Oh, no, no, dear Aunt Dudley; I don't want Jane or anybody; I only want to take a little turn alone—just up and down—I am so hot, and so worried—and so—so unhappy!" she added, her voice breaking almost to tears in spite of herself. And then Aunt Dudley knew that something must be wrong.

"Poor child!" she said to herself; "perhaps after all she is sorry she broke off her engagement, and is fretting. Ah! these love troubles, there is no getting to the bottom of them!" and then, because she was a sweet, sentimental old lady at heart, in spite of her eccentricities, she told her niece to go and do as she liked. "Only don't go towards London, Rachel," she called out after her, as she was leaving the room. "Go along the Bayswater Road towards Kensington; there will be less risk that way, and I shall feel more comfortable."

Afterwards Rachel always believed that there was the finger of Providence in those parting words. She did as she was told, and directed her steps westward. There were not many people about, and few carriages; only a few sleepy cabs crawling despondingly about looking in vain for an infrequent "fare." A well-dressed lady becomes a *rara avis* at this season of the year, and more than one passer-by gazed curiously at the tall handsome girl with the sweet oval face, and the sad dark eyes that seemed to be brimful of tears.

She walked along heeding nothing external, only full of her own anxious thoughts.

In her ears there rang, over and over again, the line out of Vere's song—

"For love to be true, must be brave."

The words seemed to be full of a new message to her,—to be telling her something which she did not know before,—urging

her on to do something from which her natural self shrank back timidly, and with a cowardly reluctance.

It came back to her mind too how once, long ago, Vere had said to her that he would never ask her for her love again, and that if she wanted him she must come to him !

Was that what he was waiting for now ?—waiting for her to cast down the last trammels of her pride and her self-love, and creep in all humility and repentance to his very feet ? Was that what he expected of her ? Would nothing less appease him ?—nothing short of this convince him that so faint a heart as hers was worthy of his acceptance ?

Ah ! how was she to do it ? She wrung her hands in impotent misery, and great tears of humiliation welled up into her eyes. All her pride of race, all the bonds and trammels of a lifetime of restraining influences, seemed to rise up before her, and forbid her thus to humble herself to him.

“ Why cannot he come to me ? ” she cried aloud to herself in her distress as she walked—but she began to see that he would never come to her unbidden. She had made a fool of Vere Sherwood once before—she had played with his love, and tossed it back to him with scorn and indignation. It would take a great deal to make him believe in her now. Nothing short of an absolute self-abnegation would content him. He had been no heart-broken swain bemoaning his wounds aloud, no love-lorn suitor praying for mercy, and entreating her for a smile. He had loved her, that was all, and his love had not seemed to her to be worth a sacrifice, and so he had drawn back from her with a proud self-reliance—and in that drawing back there was for her no triumph, only the stinging shame of a woman who knows that she has walked down deliberately from the pinnacle upon which her lover has elevated her.

Vere Sherwood had always been her master—he would be her master to the end of time—and in his mastery lay his undying influence over her.

And as she thought of it all,—of the proud unbending nature which expected of her perchance so much more than she knew how to give,—of the difficulties that surrounded her,—of Aunt Dudley’s infringeable notions of propriety and etiquette which she would have to combat,—of the absolute impossibility of seeking him literally and in the flesh, and of the almost as great an impossibility of framing a letter that would not lower her to the very dust ; suddenly somebody stood before her upon the pathway, and a voice that was strange to her, and yet oddly familiar, said to her,—

“ Surely I cannot be mistaken. Are you not Miss Brabberstone ? ”

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WISDOM OF THE SERPENT.

MARCUS CUNNINGHAM had taken his dismissal at Rachel's hands in that curiously contradictory fashion with which men are constantly surprising us and upsetting all one's preconceived theories concerning them. He knew that he did not love Rachel in the very least ; he had ceased to regard her as the only woman on earth who could minister to his own advancement ; he had told himself, and had told another, that he was amongst the most miserable of mankind, by reason of the chains which bound him to her ; he had even declared that he almost hated her, and yet, when the chains of his bondage were suddenly struck off, and he was a free man once more, he did not welcome his freedom with any raptures of delight, but, on the contrary, he was hit very hard with mortification and regret.

That which a man possesses he prizes but little ; but if that little be but taken away from him, it acquires immediately a new and fictitious value in his eyes.

There are some men who never care for anything unless it is something out of their reach, and in whose eyes a woman ceases to be attractive from the very moment she belongs to himself.

It is very certain that Mr Cunningham was not made of the stuff out of which good husbands and faithful lovers are moulded.

When Rachel's note was brought to him one morning amongst the rest of his letters, he was horribly upset and put out by it. He had opened it leisurely, not as every true lover tears open the envelope sanctified and set apart by the handwriting of her that is most dear on earth to him ; not with eager haste or happy confidence ; not picking it out amongst all others to read the first of all, or to reserve it till the last for a blissful moment of anticipated joy, but coldly, and with a *nonchalant* deliberation, taking it neither first nor last, but in its natural sequence betwixt business notices, dinner invitations, and quarterly bills.

But when he saw what she had written, he realised at once that something important and extremely disagreeable had happened to him. There was no appeal from the sentence she had pronounced. She had been in the garden, and she had heard ! After that, there was nothing more to be said. She neither upbraided nor reproached him, she did not mention her heart, nor allude in any way to the laceration or fracture of any portion of her inner woman. There was no opening for repentance in her cool and matter-of-fact sentences, nor did she hold out the very smallest loophole by which he might reason-

ably hope to creep back into favour and forgiveness. She was only glad that he had "found out his mistake in time."

Marcus did not like it. He was angry, and sore, and hurt. He to whom success had always come so quickly and so easily, did not like to have to acknowledge that here again he had made a failure, and that there could be no doubt about it that in matters of the heart he was singularly unsuccessful. Was it perhaps because he was himself so half-hearted about them?—because there was an unreal ring about his love affairs?—because he, who was so strong and so persuasive in those matters of public interest which really lay next to his very soul, was upon that other and softer side of life which concerns women, slack in purpose, and, above all, wanting in true energy and earnestness.

I knew a dear old lady once, now long laid in her grave, who used to say that no one could ever tell what a man was really made of until he had been tried in the furnace of a love affair whose course did not "run smooth." That was the test of character. Here infallibly came to the surface all that is best and noblest, or else all that is worst and meanest in a man! I am inclined to believe that there is a great deal of truth in what that old lady said. Anyhow, no after experience of mine has been able to disprove it.

As a man behaves towards a woman who loves him; as he is loyal or unloyal; as his conduct towards her is generous or niggardly; in so far as he will sacrifice himself for her welfare, or else sacrifice her to his own narrow and selfish nature, so you may fairly judge as to what that man's real fibre is made of,—whether the heart of him be gold, or only fine-seeming lacquer work.

Well, then, Marcus Cunningham failed at that particular point. He was popular and genial; he had high aims, and that ambition which is an honour, and never a shame to a man; he was, moreover, gifted exceptionally with such great talents that he well nigh touched the sublime heights of genius itself. His future was apparently assured, the forward rush of his clear-seeing mind, the upward impetus of a brain born to lead and not to follow, were such that the very highest places were already almost within a perceptible distance of him. On all public questions his soul was upright and honourable, ambitious, it is true, but ambitious without a stain of aught but what was lawful in its aspirations.

Yet, with so much that was good, there still remained the tiny flaw within the crystal goblet, the rift within the tuneful lute.

There was a lack of principle somewhere, and that lack concerned women!

Women were to Marcus Cunningham the toys or else the tools of existence. Where he loved, it was in spite of himself; where he betrayed, it was because he had no desire to be true.

He had pretended to love Rachel, because his thinking powers told him he might find her useful; he loved Elizabeth against his will and against his judgment, and he wished that he did not love her, because he knew, with his clear knowledge of the world, that to love her would be useless to him.

And so he had neither been able to be true to the woman he loved, nor yet to the woman who was bound to him.

Although he was very savage with Rachel when she wrote to him and sundered her relations with him, yet he did not see that her action had brought him any nearer to his vain and impossible desires. Elizabeth was as far off from him as ever, and he had lost Rachel!

That was what angered him and annoyed him the worst of all. The consideration of his own position, as having as it were, fallen, according to the proverb, betwixt two stools; not in the very least the trouble or the distress he might have brought upon the woman who had believed in him.

He was so worried and annoyed by Rachel's conduct, by the rupture between them, and the overthrow of all his plans, and the publicity into which the appearance of the notice in the papers brought his private affairs, that he actually deserted his post, paired with a dyspeptic member of the Opposition, and took himself off to a house in Scotland where he was usually most welcome, in order to forget his grievances amongst the grouse.

He remained at Mr Macfarlane's a fortnight, and he shot so excessively badly that he succeeded in arousing the anger of a host who was a keen sportsman almost more than he was a kindly friend, and who resented a bad shot as much as if it had been a personal affront.

"I can't think what has come to the fellow," he said grumblingly to his wife. "One used to be able to reckon on Cunningham's gun, but I declare he misses two birds out of three this year."

"It is because that horrid girl has jilted him," said Mrs Macfarlane. "You must make allowances for the poor fellow."

"Well, it's the last time I hope that a jilted man will ever come here in August then!" replied her husband.

There were a number of ladies staying in the house, and when all the men were out shooting, and the women, in elaborate tea-gowns, were grouped about the fire in the pleasant hall at the five o'clock tea hour, which is so long and elaborate a repast in bonny Scotland, poor Rachel Brabberstone, and the story of her

broken engagement, was discussed with much freedom of speech and she fared but badly amongst them all.

"I really do not know what has come to the girls of the present day!" cried one dame, fat and fair—and forty too, if the truth were known, only she was very far from owning to it, as she sat and sipped her tea from a dainty pink cup, and toyed with a plate of buttered scones upon her knee—"they are quite insufferable! They seem to have no principle at all! Who would have thought that Miss Brabberstone would have behaved so shamefully to that poor man?"

"Poor fellow, we must be very, very kind to him!" murmured another sympathetic creature softly.

"I have been very kind to him," asserted the beauty of the party, with a pout. "I was perfectly angelic to him last night, and it was all thrown away! He hard'y hears what one says to him; he has become a veritable bear. He who used to be so delightful!"

"Ah, well, one must give him time, poor fellow! It is that wretched girl—"

"Yes, it is all her fault!"

"I wonder how she dared, within a month of her marriage?"

"So heartless!"

"Positively inhuman!"

"No doubt there's somebody else in the background she is carrying on with."

"It is scandalous to think she has wrecked poor Mr Cunningham's life!"

"Horrid creature! I hope she will die an old maid."

"I should never pity her, whatever happened to her."

"Neither should I," echoed their hostess, winding up the chorus of charitable remarks characteristically, "considering that I had been invited to the wedding, and I had ordered a dress over from Worth's for the occasion, which is half made, and will be left on my hands with not an opportunity of wearing it at all that I can see until it is clean gone out of fashion next summer."

All the dear things becoming at once extremely sympathetic over this dire misfortune, Rachel, as the moving cause of the catastrophe, came in for yet more and more vilification. They tore her into ribbons—character, conduct, appearance, manners, nothing was left of her but rags. For when anybody is "down" it is the custom in this wicked world of ours to jump upon and mangle him or her, so that nothing shall be left of them save an unrecognisable pulp, void of all shape and substance.

When this stage was reached they all with one accord said

how sad it was for poor dear Marcus Cunningham, and how much they one and all desired to pour balm and consolation into his wounded spirit; and each woman said at the bottom of her heart to herself, as she looked upon her neighbour, "and it sha'n't be *you*, my dear, who shall comfort him—not if *I* am here to prevent it!"

Marcus took all their sympathetic ministrations very kindly. They spoke softly and gently to him, saying pretty little flattering things, and gazing at him with tenderly pitiful eyes; they pressed his hands unobserved in hidden corners, and sighed meaningly and gracefully at him, quoting verses appropriate to his condition, and telling him how like he was to that great poet whom he was said to resemble, "Like in your story as well as in your face!" they told him.

Marcus Cunningham liked it all very well at first—it was soothing to his vanity, and healing to that hurt sore, feeling which had made him so very uncomfortable when he had first read Rachel's note. By dint of finding himself considered as an object of sympathy and compassion, he began to think that he was in truth quite blameless in the matter, and that Rachel had treated him abominably. It was pleasanter to him to look at the subject in this light, and at last he quite persuaded himself that it was so.

"You are well quit of her!" said one of the ladies in the house to him in a moment of confidence. "A girl who could treat you like that would have never made a good wife; you ought to be glad that you have escaped her!"

"Yes, I suppose I ought," assented Marcus slowly, as he looked down with the correct amount of gloom at the carpet beneath his feet. And he did not in the least realise that he was a mean coward to say so.

"Take my advice, dear Mr Cunningham!" continued his charming consoler, laying her white hand impressively on his wrist, "tear her out of your heart, she is quite unworthy of you. Try and be thankful for what has happened, and try to leave off loving her, and to despise her for what she has done."

"Yes, that is what I am trying to do," he assented again, with the air of a Christian martyr; and he then took the hand that was still upon his cuff and raised it to his lips. It was very smooth, and small, and nicely scented with "*Fleur d'Oranger*," and Marcus lingered with much enjoyment over the caress.

This was all very well for a few days, but as he was by no means of the stuff of which the "curled darling" of a

lady's boudoir is composed, and had moreover no intention of being led on into a serious or compromising flirtation with any one of the fair ladies who were so bent upon catching his heart, as they conceived, at a rebound, he very soon began to be tired of it all.

What with being out of form with the shooting, and falling into his host's bad books in consequence, and what with a certain sense of satiety, which a clever man is sure to experience at fulsome and wholesale flatteries daily distilled into his ears, he began, after ten days or so, to discover that he had had quite enough of Mr Macfarlane's shooting party in the Highlands, and thirty-six hours of incessant rain having opportunely supervened to put the finishing stroke to his impatience, he pleaded important business, and took himself off to the South.

Parliament being prorogued, he had no excuse to put off a visit due to his father's, and the last days of the month found him accordingly at that pleasant country house under the slopes of the Sussex Downs where Sir Frederick Cunningham lived and studied, and thought, and wrote, during the greater portion of the year.

The meeting between the father and the son lacked its usual cordiality. Sir Frederick was bitterly disappointed at the collapse of the matrimonial arrangement which he had been at such pains to secure for his son.

He had been too proud and reserved to reproach him by letter, but now that they had met, it was next to impossible that a few words of censure on the one side, and of explanation on the other, should fail to pass between them.

"You have thrown away a most exceptionally desirable alliance," said Sir Frederick to him coldly and almost angrily. "For years I had planned it, and now you have upset it for a mere caprice."

"My dear father, I assure you that it is Rachel's own doing. I was perfectly prepared to carry out my engagement; she has jilted me in the most unwarrantable manner for nothing at all!"

Marcus really believed by this time that he was stating the matter in a true light.

"My dear boy, you must have given her cause for dissatisfaction. Women are curious creatures, and require a great deal of careful management! and during the time of your engagement, you should have devoted more of your time to her. I confess that the loitering about necessary to courtship is repellant to every serious and sensible-minded man; at the same time, you should have borne in mind that this was no mere

love-sick fancy, but a matter of business which concerned your advancement in life."

"Too much a matter of business, sir!" retorted his son. "I did not love Rachel Brabberstone. I did not wish to marry her. I told you so last year in Scotland, if you will remember, when you first spoke to me of your wishes."

Sir Frederick looked at him sorrowfully. He had believed better things of the son he had trained so carefully!

"When I hear you talk of love in the same breath as marriage, Marcus, then indeed I perceive that you have totally failed to apprehend the first principles of a successful life."

"You would have me then love where I cannot marry, and marry where I cannot love?" laughed his son bitterly.

"I would rather you did not marry at all, than marry badly, my son," replied the old philosopher, with sternness.

"I probably shall never marry at all," answered Marcus, as he took up a paper, and cast himself down into one of the library armchairs, as though anxious to end the discussion.

Sir Frederick looked at him curiously.

Ever since the news of the broken-off marriage had reached him, the old man had been haunted by the fear that his son, so malleable on some points, so stubborn on others, contemplated destroying himself morally by some low or inappropriate marriage.

This fear had actually spoilt his rest for many nights. For he could not otherwise account for Marcus having so resignedly given up Lord Brabberstone's daughter, without an effort at least at reconciliation. If he had really desired to be forgiven, he should at least have pleaded for forgiveness. This, according to private information received from Lord Brabberstone, Marcus had not apparently done; *ergo*, he did not wish to patch up the quarrel, whatever it was.

Was there anybody else? It was at Lady Ingram's house that the difference had arisen. Sir Frederick knew nothing about Lady Ingram, beyond the fact that Lord Dalmaine had been somewhat markedly devoted to her during the past season. This told him that she was a woman of the world, and a woman whose attractions were presumably considerable.

When Marcus declared that he probably would never marry, Sir Frederick fetched a deep sigh of unspeakable relief.

"Never," he knew to be a long day, and Marcus was young enough yet. Far better that he should remain unmarried for another ten or twelve years, than that he should wed some insignificant young woman whose connections would not further his progress in life. Far better indeed that he should make love to his neighbour's wife, be it Lady Ingram or any other, in decorous

moderation, of course !—Sir Frederick's aspirations did not overstep the limits of propriety—than that he should throw himself away in an undesirable manner.

There was a brief silence. Marcus read his paper, and his father watched him covertly, resting his elbow on his chair and shading the grey penthouse above his keen eagle eyes with a thin and long-fingered hand.

A married woman is a great help to an anxious parent. She is such an admirable antidote, such a safe stop-gap ! The free use of tobacco, although it may have certain drawbacks, and be a pernicious habit, keeps a man at any rate safe from so many other things that are worse, that it cannot but be comparatively looked upon as a virtue. So is the devotion of a marriageable man to a lady who is no longer free to be married. It may not be the best of all things, but it is so infinitely better than the worst of the things that may befall him,—builds up such an effectual barrier betwixt him and those other far more serious dangers which beset a single man of means in his perilous course along this world's devious ways, that it is no wonder that a father who honestly desires the permanent welfare of his son, should welcome the influence of the married woman as a godsend.

"Lady Ingram is a pretty woman, and must be a woman of discretion, or Dalmaine would never have taken her up," said the old cynic to himself. "And Marcus will never lose his head : he has too much common-sense."

Aloud he said, soothingly and sympathetically,—

"Take my advice, Marcus ; go and talk it all over with that pretty little Lady Ingram. Women always find their way in these delicate matters better than we rough men. She is a friend of yours, and she will give you the best advice."

And then he chuckled to himself, for he knew very well that a woman never throws a man back into a rival's arms. If Lady Ingram undertook to console and advise him, it is certain that she would bid him find his consolation by her side, and that she would be unlikely to recommend to him any course of action which might, however remotely, lead to matrimony.

"If she can keep him dancing about in her train for a year or two, I shall be grateful to her," thought Sir Frederick.

As for Marcus, at the mention of Lady Ingram's name a dull red colour flushed up all over his face and brow. He did not lower his newspaper until that tell-tale flush had faded again. Then he threw it down and walked to the window, looking out absently on to the green slopes of his father's park, and the great hills beyond the woods which bounded it. What his father told him to do was what he wanted to do himself,—

what the craving at his heart for many days past had meant. He wanted Elizabeth !

That was the reason of his restlessness,—of his dull sense of disappointment,—of his impatience and irritation at all other society. Now that his father had put it into words, he saw at once what it was that ailed him.

When he had quite recovered his composure, he answered his father tranquilly and without any show of agitation,—

“Oh, of course, when I go back to town, I shall go and see the Ingrams. They are at that old place Torrington House—a little way out of London towards Harrow ; I think I told you. I shall run down and see them for a day or two, certainly ; and, after that, perhaps I shall go abroad for a couple of weeks. I don’t know—I can’t quite say what I shall do. Anyhow, I think I shall leave you the day after to-morrow.”

And then the old serpent was certain that his wisdom had not been thrown away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HER LOVE’S HUMILITY.

RACHEL, upon being suddenly brought to a stand-still in her walk, found herself face to face with an individual whom, at the first glance, she believed to have never seen in her life before.

He was a short and somewhat stout little old gentleman, with grey hair and close-trimmed grey whiskers ; his eyes were very blue and kindly, and a good healthy rubicund colour was diffused all over his face.

His clothes were shabby and countrified in cut ; his hat of the nature known as “pot ;” in short, he resembled a country-bred man, and not a Londoner.

Rachel looked startled and bewildered. She could not put a name to him, and yet surely he was somehow familiar to her. Where had she seen him before ?

“I see you do not remember me,” said the little old gentleman, smiling, “yet I am sure I remember you, and that you are my old friend Brabberstone’s daughter.”

And the voice was so well-known to her,—so like and yet unlike to that other voice that was all on earth to her, that she recognised him at last. It was Vere Sherwood’s father.

“Oh, yes,” she said, whilst a crimson flush at her discovery flooded her sweet face from brow to throat. “I know you now. You are Mr Sherwood, and my father introduced me to you at Lady Ingram’s house in June,” and she held out her

hand with heartiness to him. "You must forgive me that I did not know you at first."

"It's not at all wonderful, my dear young lady—for why, indeed, should you remember an old duffer like me? My recollecting *you* was quite another matter; even an old man may be allowed, I hope, to keep in mind so fair a vision!" and the Squire bowed gallantly. "But which way are you going, Miss Brabberstone?—may I turn and walk a little way with you?"

Squire Sherwood was saying to himself, as he walked along by her side,—“So this is the young woman whose picture is on my boy's mantelpiece, and who is going to be married to somebody else. Well I wonder whether it is only Vere who cares for her, or if this dainty lady cared a bit for him too? I shouldn't wonder! Anybody might love Vere, and be proud of it!”

Aloud, he said politely,—

“And how is my good friend, your father?—well, I hope? Is he in town with you now?”

Rachel looked confused.

“I—I have not seen my father very lately—I am staying with my aunt, close by, in Craven Gardens.”

“Oh!” And Mr Sherwood looked at her rather curiously. “And might I inquire, my dear young lady,” he added, after a moment's pause,—“might I be allowed to ask when a certain happy event is coming off?”

“What event?” she faltered.

“Your marriage—which I have heard talked about.”

“My marriage is broken off,” she answered, trembling so much in every limb that she felt scarcely able to walk. “You—you had not heard that, Mr Sherwood?”

“No, indeed. Or I should not have alluded to it! I beg you ten thousand pardons, Miss Brabberstone. I am sorry that I asked such an indiscreet question.”

For a few moments she was silent. Her heart was beating fast. So wild and preposterous an idea had sprung into life within her—so mad a thought had rushed into her head, that for its very magnitude she could not speak; nor would her mind present to her aught save chaotic and incoherent questionings that seemed utterly beside the mark.

Was there, indeed, no such thing as destiny? she was asking of herself. Was it all a blind empty chance that had brought her face to face with Vere's father in the Bayswater Road? Was it for nothing that he was walking now by her side?—for no earthly end or purpose that he had questioned her concerning her engagement that was at an end? or was there a Fate or a Providence, a something mysterious and incomprehensible,

which had so ordered these trivial events of her life that she had been cast thus into the very arms of an opportunity which, if she threw away, might never again be given to her, and whose loss she would regret in sackcloth and ashes down to her dying day?

And whilst she debated these vexed questions within herself—whilst a very tempest of wonder and of perplexity tossed tumultuously at her heart, Squire Sherwood stood still, and held out his hand to her.

"I fear I must wish you good-bye, Miss Brabberstone—my boy will be expecting me; for as I have only come up for a couple of days, he doesn't like me to be away from him, you see, except when business interferes, and I promised I would go back for him soon after six, so I must not keep him waiting. Vere's time is very valuable, you know." He had put up his stick to signal a passing hansom—it drew up noisily at the curbstone. "You will remember me to your good father, will you not, when you are writing to him? I am very glad to have met you."

Already he had turned away from her—already his hand had loosened hers, and he was on the point of getting into the cab. Then all at once, something that was stronger than all her fears arose with an irresistible force within her. It was her last hope, and in another moment it would be too late, and all the happiness of her life would have perished for ever and ever! Like one who has looked death in the face, and who has thereafter realised the littleness of all the small cords and trammels which beset our daily lives, she saw at last that in the face of this great crisis of her existence all else was as chaff before the wind.

If she let him go, Vere would be lost to her ever.

She *would* not lose him!

"Stop! Mr Sherwood!" she cried, in a voice that was so unlike her own that the old man turned back, arrested at once by its strange keen vibrations. "Stop! do not go yet. I want to speak to you. I *must* speak to you!" she repeated, with feverish eagerness.

The Squire had turned, and came back once more to her side. The hansom cab stood waiting. She had locked her hands tightly together; her face was pale, her very lips were colourless, and her eyes seemed so large and dark and lustrous,—so filled with things unutterable and indescribable, that even our simple-minded friend the Squire saw at once that some great convulsion of soul was shaking her to the very centre of her being. He took the clenched hands between his own, and he gazed pitifully into the blanched face.

"My dear Miss Brabberstone, you are in trouble. Can I help you?"

"Yes—yes—it is you, you only who can help me; no one else on earth!" she answered feverishly. "Oh, Mr Sherwood, how am I to say it?—what will you think of me—a girl—for saying such words? and yet—I *must* say them! for if I do not speak now—this moment—then I shall be for ever and for ever the very most miserable woman upon the face of the earth! Mr Sherwood—your son loves me—and I—I am unworthy of him—and yet—I love him!"

A wave of colour passed over the old man's face. His grasp tightened upon her poor trembling hands.

"My dear, dear child!" he murmured, and with such a winning tenderness in face and voice that it seemed as if it were Vere himself who was speaking to her.

"It is true—it is true—that is why I am glad that I have broken off my engagement—and why I do not care that my father is angry with me—because liberty has come to me at last! But I have treated Vere so badly—oh, you would hate me if you knew how badly! you who have always loved him and been good to him!"

The old man winced a little, and his eyes faltered for one moment in their kindly gaze, for he too had treated Vere badly—how badly only he and his son knew!

"But I did not know my own mind so well then," she continued hurriedly—"so that, although it hurt me terribly to do it, I scorned and despised him, and betrayed the heart that he had given me. My pride—my wicked pride—stood between us! and he was angry with me, Mr Sherwood, so justly angry that I do not know if he will ever forgive me or believe in me again. Oh, tell me what I am to do!" she cried brokenly, the tears beginning to gather thickly in her dark eyes. "How am I to make him believe in me again? What shall I do to prove to him that this time at last I am in earnest, and that I will lose everything else on earth if I may only gain back his love!"

The Squire murmured tender words of affection; he could not bear to see a woman cry, and Rachel's tears went straight to his heart.

"Don't cry—don't cry, my dear, it will all come right—see if it doesn't."

"Oh, Mr Sherwood!" she said, dashing away the blinding tears from her eyes, "I am afraid of Vere, he is so hard where he has been wronged, and so unforgiving!"

"No, no, no, my dear! Vere is not hard nor unforgiving. You do not know him if you think so! I know, I have *reason*

to know, quite otherwise. Vere has the tenderest heart in the world. Men who are good, and who have great large-minded ideas as Vere has, always have tender hearts! There is no meanness nor littleness about my boy. He is stern, and just, and uncompromising, if you like, but if he forgives you, the forgiveness will be perfect. He will wipe it off his memory for ever. He will forget that you ever offended him. That is his nature. I know it. Do not be afraid of him."

"But *will* he forgive me?"

"Well, that is what we must go and ask him, my dear child!" The Squire was smiling. Rachel looked frightened. "Come, we shall find him at home very soon now—I am going with you."

"Now—do you mean? now, *at once*?" she faltered, drawing back.

"Yes—of course. There is no time like the present, my dear. Are you afraid?"

"No, no—but—my aunt—"

"Oh, your aunt will think you have prolonged your walk a little too late. She will be a little uneasy, perhaps, but when I bring you safely back by-and-by, she will forgive you for being late for dinner. Ah, do not hesitate, Rachel! for hesitation may cost you your happiness—and Vere's! My son starts for America to-morrow night."

Then she did not hesitate any longer.

"I will come with you, Mr Sherwood," she said simply; for her mind was made up at last, and again a step had been won, and her soul was at peace with itself.

They got into the cab together. The Squire gave the address of Vere's modest lodging in Bloomsbury, and Rachel was whirled away eastwards down the Bayswater Road.

Vere Sherwood had been working very hard—there had been as yet no autumn holiday for him. The things which other young men of his age and class did when the London season was over did not come into his life at all. He neither went to Goodwood nor to Cowes. The twelfth of August saw him not in Scotland; neither did the prospect of the first of September hold out hopes of popping guns in the stubble fields of pleasant southern counties. He would have liked all these things well enough, no doubt, but the muse whom he worshipped cannot be wooed save in hard and bitter earnest, and when a man is composing an opera there is no time like the dull time of the year, when evening engagements are few and far between, to sit hard at it in the stillness of the long summer days and the peace of uninterrupted nights. But if they were still and

peaceful, the days and nights were also intolerably stuffy. For the last ten days Vere's brain had begun to feel the tension and the heat in a manner that almost alarmed himself. He worked all night, and in the morning he would find that his work was inferior, or else, if he were satisfied with any portion of it, he would be so completely prostrated that for the next twenty-four hours he would find himself incapable of any further effort.

Then, providentially, as he deemed, there came to him an offer of a trip to America. A great pianist in New York desired to make the young composer's acquaintance. An invitation came to him to go over for a couple of months. He was to be "exploited" in the American capital. Concerts were to be given for him, recitals to be held for his benefit. No doubt the Yankee expected a fat commission on the transaction—for Yankees are not given to lose sight of the main chance. But all Vere's expenses were to be paid. He was to be entertained liberally and royally, and in addition, to be presented to the "first families" in the States.

American hospitality is world-renowned. Vere Sherwood felt certain he should have a good time of it. In any case, he would get what he sorely needed, rest and refreshment, and a complete change of scene.

He accepted the offer by telegram, sent to his father to come up and see the last of him, and began his preparations to get off within a few days.

All was hurry and confusion. He had a few unfulfilled engagements to perform, or to find substitutes for, interviews with his publisher, and arrangements for the postponement of the opera score that had been promised by a certain date; and in addition his own private preparations and purchases. With all this on his hands, he had very little time for reflection, or for unavailing regrets. And yet, at the very bottom of his heart there had been yet an additional reason why he had accepted the offer of the American maestro.

"I shall be out of the country when she is married," he said to himself,—“out of reach of her wedding joy bells.”

For Vere had seen no notice in the *Morning Post*. He told himself that he was a fool to care so much for a woman who cared so little for him; and yet although he was so strong, and so determined, that he succeeded in a great measure in putting her away out of his thoughts, yet in spite of his utmost efforts every now and then, the vision of the sweet face, and the sad, almost frightened eyes of the woman he had loved, would flash back again into his memory, ever with the same keen pain, and with the same sting of a never-dying

He could tell himself aloud in his bitterness that he could never forgive her, yet he could never say even in his innermost heart that he had ceased to love her.

For anger only feeds love, and love that has still the power to torture the heart is very far indeed from the indifference that will herald its death.

Vere Sherwood was not of a nature to succumb to an unhappy love, but that he was still forced to struggle, and to wrestle with it, was a sufficient proof even to himself of its vitality.

He worked very hard, and thought about it as little as he could help. And the busier he was, the better, as was natural, he succeeded in forgetting Rachel Brabberstone. He looked upon her as lost to him for ever; he hoped that he should never see her again, and he firmly believed that it was very unlikely he should ever do so.

That is perhaps why he believed himself for a moment to be the victim of a cerebral hallucination when one evening he came home soon after six o'clock, opened the door of his sitting-room, and saw her sitting under the lamp-light by the side of the table.

He sprang back almost with horror, lifting his hand to his head as one who sees a vision. An expression not of joy but of dismay, came into his eyes. Rachel sat looking at him. She was white as death; her large eyes wore that frightened look which it had made him so often impatient to see in them; there were dark circles about them, and her pale lips were fixed and rigid. It was not perhaps wonderful that the sight of her bewildered him.

Was it Rachel herself? or was it not rather some pale spiritual visitant from another world where her soul had fled, come back thus in bodily shape to look for the last time upon the man whom she had loved and lost! For a moment it seemed to him to be so.

And then she moved, and he saw that it was indeed Rachel Brabberstone who sat there.

"Rachel!" he said, scarcely above a whisper. She rose slowly, leaning on the table with both hands as though to support herself. She trembled exceedingly; she had thrown off her hat, and he could see the lines of pain and shame upon her brow, and all the disordered beauty of her thick dark hair.

"Rachel, what have you come here for?" he asked her bitterly; "what terrible mistake is this!"

"Forgive me, forgive me!" came tremblingly from her white and parched lips. She could find no other word than this, to say over and over again: "Forgive! forgive!"

"You might have spared me this!" he cried, with an angry hardness. "Of what value can my forgiveness be to you—or

how can any forgiveness of mine matter to her who will soon be the wife of Marcus Cunningham ? ”

“ I shall never be Marcus Cunningham’s wife ! ” she answered, in a low voice. “ I am not going to marry him. ”

In one instant there was an utter silence between them—he stood staring at her, unable to realise the words.

Then suddenly he made one stride towards her across the little room, seizing her hands between his own, and clenching them in so hard a grip that it was a physical pain to her.

“ Say those words again—say them again ! Do not dare to trifle with me—do not speak if it is nothing but a cruel lie ! For if it is a trick you are playing upon me, then, by Heaven, you are the vilest and worst woman upon earth ! ” He was white as death—the fire in his eyes was of a rage so wild, that he was terrible to look upon—the words came through his clenched teeth like sword thrusts—he scarcely knew what he was saying.

And somehow out of his anger courage came to her ; for by it she knew that he loved her still.

“ It is no lie ; it is true, it is true ! ” and as she said it she smiled, and looked up into his eyes, and the colour came back in a rich flood to her face. “ That is why I have come, Vere, because I am free, and because—oh ! can’t you guess it—because I love you ! ” And her face, all glowing with her confession, sank down upon the shelter of his shoulder.

He could not speak, only his labouring breath and the trembling which shook his whole frame betrayed the greatness of his agitation. His hands strayed for a moment uncertainly over her bent head, but still he could say nothing, only by-and-by his arm stole round her, and drew her nearer, nearer, nearer to his heart.

“ And you have come to tell me this ? ” he said at last, in a low broken voice,—“ come of your own accord ?—come here to find me, to humble yourself to the dust before me ? You, my queen, my goddess ! Oh, it is wonderful, wonderful ! it is more than I deserve that you should have done this for me, Rachel. ”

“ But I have not come quite alone, Vere ! ” she hastened to say, with a happy laugh. “ It is all your father’s doing ; it was he who made me come, who brought me ; he is here, in next room. ”

There was a movement of the dark *portière* curtain between the rooms. The Squire inserted his bald pate for one instant into the scene ; but he drew it back promptly, with a smothered “ Beg pardon, ” which was unheard.

“ I was never meant to see *that*, I know, ” muttered Mr Sherwood to himself, with a grimace, as he retreated precipitately into the back room.

“ That ” meant something of so engrossing and absorbing a

nature, that Vere and Rachel were by it rendered deaf, dumb, blind, and insensible to every other external influence on earth.

Then Vere asked her one question only.

"When will you marry me, Rachel?"

"Whenever you like," she answered, smiling, and blushing too.

And that was all he did ask of her. He did not trouble her with the whys and the wherefores; in her own good time she would tell him all that. It was sufficient for him that she was free to give herself to him, and that she had come to tell him so of her own accord. He wanted to know nothing more; that was what Vere's nature was, and his forbearance taught her more what manner of man he was than all else. His upright, uncompromising notions of right and wrong were perhaps a trifle hard and unsympathetic, but once touch him on the right chord and there was no limit to his generosity, no bounds to the fullness of his self-surrender.

Vere Sherwood had but little in common with the maxims of the world in which Rachel had hitherto lived and breathed and had her being.

Now she had come out of it all, and cast in her lot with him. It was as if she had entered upon a new existence.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AUNT DUDLEY HAS A TEA-PARTY.

AUNT DUDLEY always used to say afterwards that the events of that memorable evening had shortened her life. As she is alive still, this statement may be taken for what it is worth. Once she so far forgot herself as to improve upon it by remarking that it had turned her hair white, but as everybody, from Fry the butler down to Jane the housemaid, was aware of the fact that her nice full brown wig with its fat sausage curls was taken off every evening and rested upon a wooden peg on her dressing-table until the morning, and that Aunt Dudley's venerable head was as smooth as a billiard ball beneath it, there was little dependence to be placed upon that remark either.

Anyhow, that she had a bad time of it, is certain, and she deserves a full measure of commiseration for all that she went through.

When it became Fry's painful duty at dinner-time to acquaint his mistress that Miss Rachel had not come in yet from her solitary walk, he very nearly died of fright. Fry tried to shift the business on to his wife's shoulders, with a man-like coward-

ice which is inherent in the masculine nature, but Mrs Fry indignantly repudiated the responsibility.

"What is my duty, Fry, that will I perform honest; no one can say as how I ever did fail to perform a duty. But *as* butler, this 'ere is not my duty, but yourn," and Mrs Fry sailed upstairs to put away her mistress's afternoon gown and cap, with a proud sense of having effectually clenched the argument.

So Fry had to do it.

Aunt Dudley was horribly upset. Butler, cook, and housemaid were sent flying in different directions to seek for the truant, whilst Mrs Fry was summoned down to the rescue with the salts and the sal-volatile.

Poor Aunt Dudley wrung her hands in despair and remorse. Some evil, she felt certain, had befallen the child, and it was her own fault, for having allowed her to go out alone. Young ladies *never* should be out alone! harm always came of it if they did.

"I did not like it, Fanny!" she bemoaned in her woe to the ancient lady's-maid, who was also Fry's wife. "I did not want Miss Brabberstone to go out at all; I wanted her to take Jane, but I was over-ruled, and now see what has come of it!"

"It will be all right, mum; Miss Brabberstone has only lost her way, I daresay. Fry will find her, mum."

"Lost her way in the Bayswater Road! Don't be a fool, Fanny Fry! How could she do that? I tell you she has been robbed, or else carried off against her will. Such things have been heard of before."

Mrs Fanny Fry refrained from the obvious remark that a young woman of four-and-twenty was more likely to go of her own free will than against it; she only smiled meaningly as she tendered the salts bottle.

"It brings back all my old feelings, Fanny," said the poor old lady piteously. "It's just the same as it was the night poor Mr Charles died!"

"So it be, ma'm,—just the very thing as I was thinking to myself—only Miss Rachel isn't going to die, you know."

Aunt Dudley shook her head gloomily and hopelessly, but the suggestion seemed to comfort her.

An hour went by. Fry came in red and out of breath; cook came in red and out of temper; Jane, who had met her young man, the policeman, at the corner of the gardens, came in the last—also red, but smiling.

None of them had seen or heard aught of the missing damsel.

Aunt Dudley wept, and sent away her dinner untasted.

"It is a judgment on me!" she said, although nobody knew what she meant by it. And then she called for her writing-

case, that she might send a note round to summon Mr Weeks. "It is because I refused to make a will," she muttered to herself,—“but I'll do it now, before I am a day older—I'll leave it all to Rachel, every penny of it! and then nobody can reproach me for not doing my duty, whatever happens. Weeks thinks I've not resigned myself yet to the will of God,—that I have never bowed properly beneath the stroke that took Charles away! I know he thinks so. He never says so, but he thinks it of me; he considers me an unchastened vessel of wrath. But I'll show him he is wrong. I'll make a will at once, and leave the money all to Rachel, and then, if any harm has come to her, he will see at all events that I was not stiff-necked and rebellious.”

So Jane was despatched with the note, to Mr Weeks' private residence hard by, much to that damsel's joy, as she got another half-hour at the corner of the street with her friend the policeman, out of the commission; and then Mrs Dudley felt more comfortable, and consented to drink a cup of tea, with Mrs Fanny Fry standing over her.

“Yes, I'll drink it!” she said, looking up at her Abigail solemnly; “for my conscience is at rest—Charles would have wished it.”

Fanny Fry thought her mind was wandering.

An hour had gone by since Rachel was missed.

All at once there was a sound of slow-stopping wheels outside, and the visitors' bell rang.

Mrs Fry ran to the window.

“Oh, ma'm! it's a four-wheeler outside!—and people getting out of it—and—yes, Miss Brabberstone is there, leastways I hopes it is her, and not merely her mangered remnants!”

“Thank God!” murmured Aunt Dudley piously, not alluding, of course, to the “mangered remnants,” but to her intense relief that Rachel had not eloped with a lover, which had been her secret terror throughout.

Then there came footsteps up the stairs, and Fry, looking somewhat scared, threw open the drawing-room door.

Rachel came flying in all breathless and rosy, and fell on her knees by her aunt's arm-chair.

“Oh, dear Aunt Dudley, what *must* you think of me? I am so sorry to be late, and to have frightened you; but I can explain it all—and you must not be angry with me.”

Two gentlemen, one old and one young, had come in behind her. Aunt Dudley looked at them in bewilderment.

“Yes, yes!” cried Rachel, half-laughing, half-crying. “I am going to tell you who they are; they are my friends—my old friends, my dear friends, who have brought me home.”

Aunt Dudley remembered that she was a gentlewoman by birth, and a fine old lady by breeding. She rose to her feet, and made a sweeping courtesy to her visitors.

"Gentlemen, I am happy to see you ; any friends of Miss Brabberstone's are welcome in my house."

Then she descried Fry and his wife, who devoured by curiosity, were hovering all ears and eyes in the doorway. She waved her hand authoritatively to them.

"Leave us !" she said, with the air of a queen of tragedy ; "we desire to be alone !"

The butler and his wife bolted precipitately.

Then there was a moment of silence. Squire Sherwood came forward, and took Aunt Dudley's outstretched hand.

"Madam, it was my doing that your niece is so late. She will explain to you all that has happened, and you will, as a woman of the world, readily understand that this is one of those exceptional cases which sometimes unavoidably disturbs the quiet of daily life, and whose rarity forms its chief excuse."

Aunt Dudley was the simplest soul in creation ; that was perhaps why she liked to be called a "woman of the world" immensely.

As to the Squire, he had never made such a fine speech in his life before.

Rachel and Vere looked at each other, and with difficulty refrained from bursting into laughter.

"This is my son," added the Squire, designating Vere with his forefinger.

"And I am going to marry him !" supplemented Rachel.

Aunt Dudley uttered a smothered exclamation, and sank back into her armchair aghast.

Rachel got up from her knees and went and stood by her lover, twining her arm fondly into his. She looked the picture of radiant happiness, joy shone in her eyes, and love trembled upon the curved smile of her lips. She was a transformed woman from the Rachel of three hours ago.

"Don't look alarmed, dear Aunt Dudley," she said. "It sounds very sudden, I know, but it really is not sudden at all. Mr Sherwood and I have known each other—and *loved* each other"—with a shy glance up into his face—"for years ! My engagement was all a mistake and a horrible nightmare, and now it is over, and all has come right between us. You *must* stand by us, Aunt Dudley—we want you to be our friend !"

Aunt Dudley was trembling.

"My dear girl, have you thought of your father and mother ?"

"Not much, I fear," cried Rachel, shaking her head, "for I

am afraid they will disapprove horribly ; but we want your intercession and help—Vere and I ! ”

The old lady was flattered. A case of true love never appealed in vain to her sentimental old heart. She made them sit down, one on either side of her, and took a hand of each.

Vere was a handsome fellow. Is there any age when a women ceases to be impressed by a good-looking man ? Aunt Dudley's faded old eyes rested approvingly upon the young man.

“ You are a very bad match, I am afraid ! ” she said, with a smile, shaking her head at him.

“ I earn my living, Mrs Dudley, by hard work,” answered Vere simply ; “ but I think I can work hard enough to support your great-niece in comfort.”

“ And, pray, what is your profession ? ” inquired Aunt Dudley. Rachel's heart beat.

“ I am a musician,” replied Vere.

“ It is the noblest profession on earth ! ” cried Rachel breathlessly.

Vere reached out his hand and took hers across her aunt's knees.

“ Rachel has learnt to think so,” he said, with so tender a smile of gratitude that the old lady's eyes filled with tears.

“ My dear sir,” she said, a little doubtfully, “ I am an old woman, and I am behind the times. When I was young, gentlemen went into the Army or Navy, the Church, or the Bar, if they had not independent means—they did nothing else. Now-a-days they do a great many things. They sell tea, and wine, and beer ; they float companies ; they gamble on the Stock Exchange ; they seem to me to do anything they like, and nobody thinks the worse of them. And I don't know why, if the calling be honest, a gentleman should not be permitted to make his living in any way he can. I can't see that to sell music is any worse than to sell wine. I am very fond of a brass band myself,” added Aunt Dudley conclusively. Her ideas as to Vere's profession were evidently vague. Whether he kept a music-shop or made melody in the streets seemed a thing of mystery to her.

“ My son is a great genius, madam ! ” here burst forth the Squire energetically. “ He will be as great a man as Mozart or Rossini some day ; he is a great composer, and he sings better than any one else in England ! ”

Vere laughed ; but Rachel clapped her hands and cried that it was all true—quite true !

“ I myself, when I was ignorant and pig-headed,” continued the Squire, “ I set my face against it, thinking it all folly and trumpery—but now I have seen what it is, I think it a very fine profession, and so does your niece ; don't you, Rachel ? ”

"The finest profession in the world!" cried Rachel again; for it is wonderful, when people change their minds, how firmly they become wedded to new views of things, and how strong is the reaction in their opinions.

"Anyhow, Aunt Dudley, it doesn't matter," she cried; "because whether papa or mamma consent or not, we are going to be married on the first of November!"

"Oh, my dear!"

"Yes; it is quite settled. Vere has to go to America for a month. He was to have started to-morrow, but now he is not going till next week; and he was to have stayed away two months, but now he is coming back in one, so that we may be married on the day he has fixed."

Aunt Dudley looked a little shocked.

"Rachel, when I was young, the *lady* always fixed the day."

"Ah, Mrs Dudley, ladies were not so flighty in those days as they are now," said Vere smiling. "Now we have to be so very masterful, in order to get our own way!"

"Now if that doesn't remind me of Charles exactly!" cried Aunt Dudley delightedly. "It's an odd thing, but you have recalled him to me ever since you came in!"

Vere looked bewildered, but Rachel made him a sign, and he said nothing.

"You *are* like him!" continued the old lady. "He was fair and big, with blue eyes like yours, and he spoke as if he knew his own mind, and meant to have his way—just as you do! Oh, you are decidedly like him!" She paused a moment, then turning upon him suddenly, said, "Do you like crumpets?"

Rachel shook her head violently behind the old lady's cap.

"I—I don't think I do—'sudden death' they call them, don't they?—rather nasty things, and give one indigestion, I think."

Aunt Dudley cast up her eyes and hands in ecstatic rapture.

"I knew it!" she cried—"I knew it!—a similarity of antipathies!—the same nature exactly! Charles *hated* them!" she added solemnly, turning round upon him. "He *never* would eat them—and I never have them within my doors!"

"I am very glad of that," said Vere gravely.

After that there was no further difficulty in gaining Aunt Dudley's consent. She was a little flustered and flurried, but she kissed Rachel on the forehead, and she pressed Vere's hand affectionately, and assured him again that there was certainly a fate in it, for that he was decidedly like poor Charles.

The lovers retired into the back drawing-room, and the Squire sat down to talk to the old lady.

"They won't be paupers at all, whatever his calling may be,"

she said confidentially to him. "I don't mind telling you that I have made up my mind this evening to make my will."

"Pray have you never made one before?" inquired the Squire, in some surprise.

"Certainly I did, Mr Sherwood. Charles was my sole heir—he was the most excellent young man that ever was born. He was tall and broad like your son. You would never have supposed that he was consumptive—it was incredible that he should have died of consumption!" she added, almost with irritation.

It is certain that Aunt Dudley had never forgiven her nephew for dying so inopportunately.

"After I had made my will and all, it was very trying that he should have died," she continued fretfully. "It has been a great trouble to me—and I never could bear to think of another will; but perhaps it is rebellious of me to look at it in that light. I know Weeks thinks so—Weeks is my solicitor—he does not say it, of course, but I see it in his eyes—he thinks me wanting in Christian resignation. But I am going to prove to him that he is wrong for once. I am going to instruct him to draw up another will, and everything I have will go to Rachel—this house, and the furniture, and about twenty thousand pounds. That will make her quite independent, you see."

"That is indeed liberality," murmured the Squire; "the young people will appreciate your kindness, ma'm."

"I hope they will. There is only one condition—I don't want to lose Rachel. I have grown fond of her. Why shouldn't they live here with me? There is plenty of room in this house, and there is a large empty back room downstairs, which your son can have to himself to do his music in. Nobody will interfere with him there, and as there are double baize doors to the room, he will not be a nuisance to anybody else."

This was a somewhat startling way of putting it, but Aunt Dudley had evidently no notion that she was not saying all that was natural and proper concerning her future nephew's mysterious occupation.

The Squire sat a little bit straight on his chair, and looked at her.

"She will know better in time," he said to himself, and he remembered how angry and dull-witted he too had been once upon the subject of a profession which had appeared to him not only foolish but actually ignoble. He rather wondered indeed that Aunt Dudley took it as well as she did.

But Aunt Dudley was very old; and when people are over eighty, they take things very quietly, as a rule. Nothing astonishes or upsets them very much.

At this juncture Fry, uninstructed—but burning to know what was going on amongst his betters—entered the room bearing a tray upon which were tea, coffee, poached eggs, and cakes. It seemed to be an instinct of thoughtful hospitality on his part; it was in reality a trait of unabashed inquisitiveness.

Like a good many actions of unworthy motives in this world, this spontaneous outburst of attention to the comfort of his superiors was received by them with far more appreciation than it deserved. Rachel was exceedingly hungry, and the Sherwoods, who had foregone their dinner-hour in order to bring her home, were quite ready by this time to remember those carnal appetites which, in the excitement of the evening, had become forgotten.

They all sat round the table and had a very pleasant little tea-party together. Rachel dispensed the hospitalities, looking the picture of happiness, and Vere, sitting close beside her, could not take his eyes off her face, and was privately of opinion that the millenium was about to be ushered in, and that nothing short of paradise itself lay within the four walls of Aunt Dudley's gloomy little drawing-room in Craven Gardens.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FAIR FIGHT—AND TREACHERY.

"SIR JAMES INGRAM is very ill, sir. He has had another stroke."

This was the news that met him at the door of Torrington House, as Cunningham alighted from his hansom.

"Dear me, I am very sorry to hear it. Can I see Lady Ingram?"

The man stood uncompromisingly in the doorway—in the very centre of it. There was evidently no intention in his mind of permitting the visitor to cross the threshold.

"Her ladyship is not receiving anyone, sir. Her orders is very particular."

Marcus fumbled in his pocket, and a small gratuity found its way into the man's hand.

"Go and ask if I can see Lady Ingram for a minute. I think she would see me."

The footman's face softened under the irresistible sop.

"Thank you, sir. Please walk this way, sir. I will go and inquire."

And Cunningham was ushered with promptitude across the hall into the large drawing-room.

It was empty. He sat down and waited. The windows were

thrown wide open on to the lawn, and the scent of mignonette and the song of birds, came wafted drowsily in upon the warm sunshine. The clock upon the mantelpiece ticked noisily ; the room looked preternaturally orderly ; there were no books left open upon the sofa, no litter of feminine trumperies on the tables, no evidences of recent occupation in the chairs that were set squarely, each in its appointed place. All was specklessly clean, swept and garnished, like a room which no one has used for days. There was that stillness in the house, that oppression of silence, which serious illness carries with it. No footsteps sounded along the corridors, no doors were slammed across the hall, there was a hush upon the house.

Marcus sat and watched the clock. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes went by. He began to think that he was forgotten, that the man had played him false, and had not told his mistress of his arrival, or that death itself reigned in the chambers above his head.

His heart beat a little in an unaccustomed fashion. What would she say to him when she came ? how would she receive his visit ? Would she be angry with him for forcing his presence once more upon her, after he had promised to keep out of her way ? or would she understand at once that the circumstances were so altered,—that there was no longer the same yawning gulf between them, and would she forget him when she saw him ?

He was angry with fate because her husband was ill again. If he were to die, then indeed all might yet be well, but if he were only ill and in danger, then Elizabeth was further from him than ever, because he knew that she would never desert her post or leave the husband who in his weakness depended upon her.

Whether he wished to tempt her to leave him had not as a matter of fact presented itself clearly to his own mind. If he had been asked if he desired to induce Lady Ingram to leave her home, he would have denied the imputation angrily and indignantly. He would have said that he wanted nothing of the kind, that all he wanted was to see her. He had that craving hunger for the sight of the woman he loved, which gnaws like a living torture at the heart of every human being who loves, and whose love is unsatisfied. He suffered on her account, and the only panacea to his suffering seemed to him to be in her presence. Like the drunkard, he could not do without the fatal draught that brought him a temporary relief ; like the opium eater, he did not know how to turn away from the poison that was killing him. All his worldly wisdom was as nothing before this cruel flame of an unsatiated love which burnt like fever in his veins.

He had no plan, no scheme, no fixed idea in his mind concerning her, only, he wanted to see her!

After what seemed to him a very long time, he caught the sound of the rustle of a woman's skirt. He rose eagerly to his feet. The door opened softly, and there entered—Lady Arthur Millbanke!

He was bitterly disappointed. But he shook hands with her mechanically, and with outward civility.

Lady Arthur looked aggressive and war-like.

"Sir James is very ill," she said, as she shook hands with him. "There are two doctors upstairs with him now."

"I am grieved to hear it. Is he likely to die?"

"Oh dear, no! we have every hope to-day—there is a decided improvement since yesterday in his condition." She had a kind of savage pleasure in saying this. Had the man come to gloat over her old friend before the breath was out of his body? "Lady Ingram is much engaged in her husband's room naturally; and very much fatigued. She is not able to see anybody. She has sent me down to speak to you. It is very kind of you to have called."

There was defiance in her every word, in the very glitter of her eyes.

"I hoped she would have seen me herself," said Marcus.

"Why should she see you? Does a wife leave her husband's bedside when he is dangerously ill, to speak to her acquaintances?"

Cunningham smiled deprecatingly.

"I think I may consider myself rather more than a mere acquaintance, Lady Arthur—I knew Lady Ingram before her marriage—she has been always good enough to look upon me as her friend."

"Well, she does not see friends any more than acquaintances!" replied Blanche tartly. "It is odd that you should expect it." Then she threw herself suddenly down into a corner of the sofa, and settled the cushions behind her back. Marcus sat down too, promptly. Any delay was valuable to him. "Look here, Mr Cunningham," said the lady; "it is just as well that we should understand one another, is it not?"

Cunningham bowed.

"Why then do you come to this house? You know, as well as I can tell it to you, that you are better out of it. You disturb Lady Ingram's peace of mind."

For the life of him Marcus could not help that small smile of gratified vanity which crept over his face at the flattering imputation.

Lady Arthur, who was as sharp as a needle, saw it plainly, and it lashed her into fury.

"Oh, yes,—I daresay you are pleased—and that I ought not to have spoken of it—ought not give my friend away—but I am past all that, and I do not care, so long as I can persuade you to leave her alone."

A dull flush of anger mounted to his brow.

"Lady Arthur, I think you are under a misapprehension. You speak as if I had done an injury to Lady Ingram,—as if I were persecuting her with unwelcome attentions—"

"You have made mischief enough already," she interrupted hastily. "You cannot blind me as to the cause of the breaking off of your engagement. It is too evident that Rachel Brabberstone guessed the truth, when you were last here; and people are already saying that it is Elizabeth's doing,—that it was she who took you away from her! Ah, it is maddening to me to hear it! Now, for Heaven's sake, be a man, and do not give colour to these horrible slanders by coming here after her, at a time when her husband is unable to protect her name. Keep out of her way. You may fancy that you care for her—God forgive me if I wrong you!—you *may* even love her, in the best and truest sense of the word; but if there is one grain of unselfish regard for her happiness in your love, prove it now by keeping away from her. You can only destroy her peace of mind, and ruin her good name, by coming down here to see her at such a time as this."

He was silent, looking gloomily down at the carpet beneath his feet. A certain shame overcame him, and a conviction that Lady Arthur was right.

She was no narrow-minded prude,—no dragon of an old-world virtue, but a modern lady of fashion, who knew life and all its temptations too well to pretend to be in ignorance of them; and she was a good woman—a woman who was good not because she had never been tempted, but because she had been in the furnace herself, and had come out of it unscathed. She knew the evil as well as the good, and she had rejected the evil and chosen the good. These are the women whose influence is really of value in the world in which they live,—who will reach out a hand to a fellow-woman who is weak and wavering, and not push her off into the mire,—who are just and merciful,—who will make allowances where allowances are due, and who will stand by the sinner sooner than trample upon her. Pity there are so few Lady Arthur Millbankes! this evil world of ours would be all the better for more of them!

Marcus Cunningham lifted his eyes slowly and looked at her.

He took in every detail of her graceful figure half reclining upon the sofa; the gold-crowned head that was her glory flung back upon the crimson cushions. He saw that she was a beautiful woman; he had never, perhaps, realised her beauty so strongly as at this moment when her goodness and her courage were so apparent to him. All the years that she had spent in the whirl of life had not sufficed either to harden or to corrupt her. In spite of her independence of thought and action, her invalided husband, her position in society, that was almost that of a widow, no breath of scandal had ever gone forth against her. Her beauty and her cleverness had never been used amiss; she had proved it indisputably that a woman need not be an anchorite to be good, nor walk through the world with closed eyes and a veiled understanding to be spotlessly pure.

Lady Arthur knew everything under the sun, and yet in her very knowledge lay her unassailable strength. Marcus Cunningham felt a profound respect for her. Individually she had thwarted and annoyed him from first to last, but he knew that she was right, and he honoured her for her candour.

She had touched the small chord of goodness and of honour which his father's training had left unpolluted. He rose suddenly and held out his hand to her.

"You are quite right, Lady Arthur," he said humbly, "and I will go away. I do love her,—better than anything else on earth, but I would not harm a hair of her head for millions."

She was surprised—she had not expected it of him.

"You are a better fellow than I thought you were!" she said involuntarily, as she took his hand. "Sir Frederick has not quite turned you into a machine for self-aggrandisement after all! He has left you a scrap of good feeling still! You must have got it from your mother!" she added, with a naïve spontaneity which made him laugh. "You must excuse me—but really I know that father of yours so well! I always have believed you to be the creation of his theories; but, thank God, he has not made quite a success of you!"

He laughed again, and then he hesitated. He became suddenly grave.

"If I go away now," he said; "if I leave England immediately, and come here no more, will you promise to do something for me? Will you give Elizabeth a note that I want to write to her?"

"Certainly I will. Sit down and write to her now."

She pushed up a chair to the writing-table that stood in one of the windows, and laid a sheet of paper upon the blotting-book for him. Then she went away and stood by the mantelpiece,

with her back turned upon him. She thought he was to be trusted. The little touch of manliness, the frank confession of his love, the readiness with which he had owned her advice to be good, had made her inclined to treat him generously.

"He will tell her he is going, and wish her an eternal farewell," she said to herself.

It was what he had intended to do.

But as he sat, pen in hand, before the table, ere yet he had dipped the quill into the ink, something happened which turned the whole current of his being, and stepped abruptly betwixt him and his short-lived impulses of goodness and self-abnegation.

His eyes, that had wandered away across the sunlit lawn, caught sight of a woman's slender figure in the distance. She was strolling slowly downwards towards the pool—her back was turned to the house and to the windows. She had nothing on her head, and the sunshine lit up the brown tendrils of her silky hair into a tender golden radiance. Her head was bent, her hands clasped before her; her dress, some sort of morning-gown of clinging grey cachemire, swept upon the grass behind her—her whole attitude was one of inexpressible sadness and desolation. He could not see her face, but the very pose of her head, the very curve of the small white neck, and every movement of the slow and lagging footsteps, told him that she was desperately unhappy. He watched her with an aching heart and miserable eyes until she had disappeared behind a clump of evergreens. A low sigh broke from his lips. The sight of her had unmanned him. The love he felt for her who was so far out of his reach became again the motive power within him. The words which he had meant to write to her—manly words of friendship and of farewell—died away within him. His heart began suddenly to beat, and the blood rushed in a flood to his head. The sight of her wretchedness made him realise that he might win her. He yielded to the foul temptation that assailed him, and his good angel spread his wings and fled. He dipped his pen into the inkstand, and what he wrote was this,—

"MY ELIZABETH,—I came here to see you, but you are too well guarded. And Lady Arthur is sending me away—I will not come here again. When you can bear your misery no longer, I entreat you to leave your wretched life and come to me. I will give up everything on earth for you, for I cannot live without you. I shall be at my rooms in town for the next three weeks—write or telegraph to me there, and I will hold myself in readiness to go with you to the other side of the

world, where we can begin a new life together and be happy. I know that you will write to me, for I know that you love me—even as I love you—to the death!—Yours, MARCUS.”

Then he folded it up and sealed the envelope, and rose from the table.

As Lady Arthur took the letter from his hand he could not meet her eyes, and there was a confused sound whirling in his head.

“I will give her this at once,” he heard her say, as one who hears voices in a dream.

She thought she could understand his agitation, and she pitied him.

“You are a man of honour,” she said heartily. “You are doing what is generous and what is right, and you will never repent it!” and there was a gentle, womanly compassion in her eyes, and in the tone of her voice.

But Marcus could not answer her, the horrible treachery of what he was doing smote him hard like a physical blow.

For he knew himself to be a coward and a liar, and when a man once has come to that knowledge concerning himself, then all his self-respect has perished, and his peace of mind is dead and gone for ever and for ever.

He could not remember afterwards how he wished her good-bye and got away out of the room, or how he got back to town in the hansom that had brought him down; he only remembered that horrible singing noise in his head, and a mocking voice that seemed to cry out to him, over and over again, like a devil that jibes and sneers,—

“You are a man of honour! you are a man of honour!”

After he had gone, Blanche, who was so honest herself that she did not suspect dishonesty in others, took the letter and gave it herself into Elizabeth’s hands, turning away and leaving her alone before she had even broken the seal, so that she might not be a witness of her friend’s possible distress and emotion. She was proceeding leisurely upstairs, feeling not ill-satisfied with her morning’s work, when a servant came quickly after her and handed her a telegram.

It was from Lord Arthur, who desired her immediately to join him at Plymouth. He was ill, and his yacht had left him there at an hotel—he wanted his wife.

This was what she gathered from the brief sentences of the telegram. Such a summons could not be disregarded. Lady Arthur knew that she must start at once—her first duty was to her husband.

But she was terribly disturbed on Elizabeth's account. To desert her now in the midst of her trouble, with Sir James's life trembling in the balance, seemed very hard. She would gladly have stayed with her until all the danger was over. The great cause for thankfulness which filled her mind as she superintended the hurried packing of her boxes, was that the telegram had not come to her twenty-four hours sooner.

"If I had been sent for yesterday," she said to herself, "Elizabeth would have been lost, for Heaven only knows the harm that Marcus Cunningham might have done to her! However, thank God, that danger is over, and I was able to bring him to his senses. He will be wise now, no doubt, and leave England for a time. Then she will get over it; and by-and-by, if poor Sir James does *not* recover, why then, then, perhaps, they will come together again! After all, he has some good in him, and to marry Elizabeth might be the making of him."

And Lady Arthur allowed her thoughts to run away with her imagination, until she had built up a very pretty little romance in her own mind.

"That is the way her story would certainly end in a three-volume novel!" she said to herself.

Ah, Lady Arthur, real life is horribly hard and prosaic, and things very seldom do wind up as they do in novels! Meanwhile a very brilliant idea occurred to her, which without saying a word to Elizabeth, she carried promptly into action.

She wrote to Elizabeth's mother. Briefly she told her how ill Sir James still was, and how she herself was obliged to leave Torrington House. She told her that her daughter was worn out, and not fit to be left alone, and begged her to come if she possibly could, to stay with her until her husband should be better.

"I daresay Elizabeth would be very angry with me if she knew I had written," she thought, as she posted her letter on her way up to town. "Mrs Fairgrave is apparently a poor creature, and has never been a comfort to her child; but, all the same, a mother is a mother, and if the name is not all the rapture that it ought to be, it is at any rate a protection, and better than her being left alone."

And what Lady Arthur meant by "protection," was no doubt that it would protect her from slanderous tongues and unkind imputations,—from her own solitude and low spirits, and also from something else at the very very bottom of her mind, which she was determined not to put into words, but which lay like a vague shadow at the very remotest corner of her speculations. The nearest she came to it, was to murmur dubiously, as she flung herself into the Plymouth train at Paddington Station,—

“For after all, men have been known before now not to keep their good resolutions for long.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MRS BERTRAM ONCE MORE.

ALL this time, down in Silshire, a certain lady whose fortunes have been too long overlooked in these pages, had been going through that dreary process of which the proverb hath spoken. Having in an evil moment “married in haste,” Mrs Gabriel Fairgrave was “repenting at leisure.”

She had time, plenty of time, for her repentance ! From the early hour of seven in the morning, when the worthy doctor insisted upon her getting up, in order to see to his eight o'clock breakfast ere he started on his daily rounds, up to eleven o'clock at night, when she was grudgingly allowed to go to bed. All through the weary hours that intervened, Mrs Fairgrave was employed in little else than in repenting her of that evil hour in the which she had consented to give herself over into the hands of her tyrant.

For Dr Fairgrave had very soon merged the ways of a tender lover into those of a harsh and tyrannical husband. The outer polish he had so carefully assumed in order to encompass his design of marrying her, fell away from him with the most extraordinary rapidity. No sooner was that object accomplished, and before the four weeks of the lovers' “Moon of honey” were at an end, than the true nature of the man—which was coarse, brutal, and vulgar—became revealed in all its hideous reality to the unfortunate and foolish woman who, in a moment of pique and flattered vanity, had so harshly confided not only her future, but her fortune, unreservedly into his hands.

Small regard did the poor lady now receive from the hands of her quondam medical sympathiser and adviser in the once engrossing subject of her ailments, real or imaginary. Dr Fairgrave very soon took the opportunity of informing her that there was nothing on earth the matter with her save laziness and self-indulgence, and that to get up at seven o'clock and see to her husband's breakfast, and to the ordering of his lunch and dinner, was the best cure in the world for her maladies ; and that the only medicine which would do her any good was active employment in her household, and hard labour amongst his own socks and shirts.

The good old days when the spoilt beauty of a past generation was accustomed to breakfast in bed and to come down

leisurely, after a lengthened and elaborate toilette, at mid-day, were indeed for ever gone. The Doctor would not even allow her a maid—he called it an unnecessary expense, and sent Dawks away a month after he was married, and to all her tearful remonstrances and representations that Dawks understood her delicate constitution, and knew so well what to do when she had her attacks of nerves, he only answered brutally that her constitution was of iron, and her nerves were all bosh ! Poor Mrs Fairgrave, harassed and worried by incessant persecutions, soon became a far more genuine invalid than ever Mrs Bertram had been.

All day long she wept and fretted, living in mortal fear of her proprietor, and resorting to all sorts of petty devices to evade his orders and elude his tyrannies ; and all day long she regretted the patient pretty daughter she had loved so little, and driven so remorselessly away from her.

“ Elizabeth would never have let me be treated like this,” she used to say to herself, when compelled to forego some cherished luxury or perform with her own hands some domestic drudgery to which in the pampered days of her widowhood she would never have thought it possible to bring herself. “ Elizabeth would be horror-struck if she could see what he makes me do—she would never allow it ! ”

For Gabriel Fairgrave was the meanest-natured man under the sun. Having got hold, firm and fast, unfettered and unsettled, of his wife’s money, he was determined to expend it solely and entirely upon himself and his own pleasures. Consequently he stinted and screwed her down to the uttermost farthing, whilst he regaled himself in various ways to things which solely affected his own comforts.

For instance, he cut down the maid-servants from five to two, making his wife rise early, so that she might lay the breakfast-table and assist the housemaid in odd ways, by dusting the drawing-room, and washing up the tea things, whilst he started a second man, and a third horse in the stables ; and after binding the dress-loving lady down to an allowance of fifty pounds a year for her clothes, he liberally added another ten pounds to the cook’s wages, in order to secure a ‘ chef ’ who should be equal to the requirements he demanded of her.

For the Doctor loved good living above all else, and his wife was very soon made to understand that the only way to win her husband’s favour was to see that the food that was set before him was thoroughly to his mind.

He was fond of all sorts of highly-seasoned and elaborately-

according to the highest order of cookery. His sauces must be mixed with cream and wine, and flavoured with truffles ; and nothing plain, either roast or boiled, must ever be set before him.

He used to bring home wonderful recipes for fish or fowl that he had begged from the tables of his wealthier clients, and command his wife to see them carried out with careful exactitude in her own kitchen, and set before him without fail by the next evening's dinner.

In order to carry out these peremptory directions, poor Mrs Fairgrave found herself forced to go down into the kitchen and personally superintend the decoction of these savoury messes which the soul of her lord loved. For long hours she stood over the fire and bent over steaming stewpans, scorching her face at the blaze, and feeling sick and faint with the hot odours which were wafted up under her nose. What love might never have induced her to do, sheer terror extracted from her ; and in spite of all her disgust and repugnance, oddly enough, she developed an extraordinary and hitherto unsuspected touch of culinary genius.

She knew more by nature, she found, than did Mary Anne by education. She was quicker to grasp a new *plat*,—more subtle in apprehending the exact amount of flavouring required, —more ready in imparting it to the substance under manipulation. She could “dish up” with a nimble dexterity which caused the eyes of Mary Anne to open in amaze, and “garnish” after a fashion which would have merited the approbation of a Francatelli. Thus her labour became insensibly her only pleasure ; and in the person of this timid and down-trodden woman was fully carried out that hackneyed truism that one never knows what one can do until one tries.

When Mrs Fairgrave heard that her daughter had come home from her travels abroad and was settled down in her husband's town house in Upper Belgrave Street, there arose within her breast faint longings to partake again of that life of gaiety and excitement from which she had so long been cut off. For why should Elizabeth be enjoying all the good things of this world, and she be left out in the cold ?

Then there came to her ears rumours of her daughter's success and popularity. Her doings were recorded in the Society papers, and her parties occupied a prominent position amongst the lists of fashionable entertainments. Poor Mrs Fairgrave's mouth began to water. She was sorry that she had been cold and distant to her son-in-law, and that she had allowed him to perceive that she resented his having transferred his old admiration for her to her child. It had done no

the only people who might have brightened her melancholy existence. Either that, or her marriage, was it? that had made Sir James ignore her very existence, and even Elizabeth's letters come few and far between. As to the Brabberstones, they too were altered and unfriendly—they had not invited her and her new husband to dinner at all, which was certainly a slight, even though Lord Brabberstone had been laid up with an attack of the gout since the family had been in Silshire. Gout or no gout, she not unreasonably considered that they might at least have bidden them to a family dinner, or even have asked them to lunch, by way of showing her some slight civility. But Lady Brabberstone took no notice of her at all, and even Rachel ceased to run across the fields to the jasmine-covered Lodge beyond the meadows; and at last one fine day the whole family went up to London, and Mrs Fairgrave heard no more of them.

The poor lady felt it all very much indeed; she began to perceive that she had made a terrible mistake, and that she was being punished very severely for it.

Then again she bethought her of Elizabeth, and wild ideas of going up to town to stay with her daughter began to ferment in her brain.

One evening, after a particularly well-cooked dinner, which the Doctor had actually vouchsafed to praise, and of which he had partaken with great heartiness, Mrs Fairgrave judged the moment to be a favourable one for broaching the subject that was nearest her heart. With a little nervous cough she plunged boldly into the waters of uncertainty and doubt.

"Ahem!—I heard from Elizabeth to-day, Gabriel."

"Oh!" The Doctor was chewing an olive and sipping a glass of port. There was a silence.

"I was thinking—I was thinking—" began his wife again timidly, and then stopped short.

"Well—what were you thinking?—why don't you say out what you mean?"

"I only meant that I should only like to go up to London, and pay her a little visit."

Dr Fairgrave uplifted his eyes and fixed them with deliberation upon his better-half. They were stony.

"Oh, you were thinking that, were you? And where's the money for your journey to come from, I should like to know?"

"I—I could go second class," she faltered.

"Second class! Twenty-four and six each way! Do you think I can afford to throw away my money like that, Mrs Fairgrave? It's hard enough to make a sovereign, God knows, now-a-days—in a dry season, and in this confoundedly healthy

neighbourhood—it's not likely I'm going to chuck two pound twelve right away into the gutter for nothing, is it?"

Mrs Fairgrave dissolved into tears.

"I haven't seen Elizabeth since she married!" she murmured; "and I wanted to go *so* much."

"Well, then, you'll have to want," he retorted coarsely, pushing back his chair and rising from the table. "Who do you suppose, besides, is going to do your work for you whilst you are away?—and how should I get anything fit to eat?"

"Mary Anne does things very nicely now, Gabriel," she suggested tearfully, but she knew that her cause was a lost one.

The Doctor consigned Mary Anne to a locality unfit for ears polite, and stumped himself off to his study, calling back to her as he left the room,—

"You'll not go, so that's the end of it. Don't let me hear any more about it. I hate that girl of yours, and there's no occasion for you ever to see her again."

Then came the news of Sir James Ingram's illness, and Mrs Fairgrave once more pleaded that she might be allowed to go and see her child.

"She don't want you—show me the letter—she doesn't ask you to go! If she wanted you, and paid for your journey, I'd let you go—as it is, you are better off where you are," he answered unkindly.

But Mrs Fairgrave fretted horribly. The thought of Elizabeth left alone with a paralyzed old man made her wretched, and the latent maternity within her awoke at last a pitying affection for the girl whom she had driven into so unsuitable a marriage by her own precipitate folly.

"I wish I had kept her with me—we might have both been happier," said the poor lady to herself sadly, as she went about her daily drudgery, and wept vainly over the peaceful and happy life with her daughter which was over for ever.

Gabriel Fairgrave began in these days to absent himself frequently from home. Apparently he had patients who lived a long way off, and who required his attendance unaccountably often.

For some time Mrs Fairgrave paid no attention to it—she was only too thankful to be relieved from his unwelcome presence; but by-and-by rumours of an uncomfortable nature began to reach her ears, and one day old Adam Feun, who still tended the garden where Elizabeth used to wander in her desolate girlhood, came up to the house and desired to speak to her.

Adam's language was not perhaps delicately chosen, but it

was honest and very thoroughly to the point. He could not bear to see his "missus put upon," and felt it his duty to open her eyes to what was becoming the talk and the scandal of the neighbourhood.

There was a barmaid at the "Green Dragon," in Hamerton, a pert, flighty piece of goods, with whom the Doctor was said to spend most of his time, and upon whom it was evident that he was spending a great deal of money. She had been seen hanging on to his arm at the Music Hall in the evening, and driving about the lanes in his dogcart in the daytime. She was decked out in silk gowns, and hat with ostrich feathers, and gold chains and bangles dangled about her neck and wrists. Everybody was crying shame upon him, and Adam Fenn could not hold his tongue any longer.

Mrs Fairgrave felt it horribly. The whole story was so common and degrading—the blow to her pride, the outrage to her womanly instincts were very humiliating to her. When the Doctor came home that day she reproached him in no measured terms for his perfidy. The Doctor swore at her, and struck her in the presence of the maid. Then he went out of the house, slamming the hall door angrily behind him, and did not come back till the following day.

A week or two went by—things went from bad to worse. Adam became her regular informant. He told her that Hannah Collings had been turned out of the "Green Dragon" for her improper conduct, and had set up for herself in a smart six-roomed semi-detached villa just outside the town, which the Doctor had taken for her, and where he spent most of the time he was supposed to be visiting his patients.

When this crushing intelligence came to her, Mrs Fairgrave felt that she could bear it no longer; she determined to leave him. All night long she wept and wailed and sorted her things, not knowing how she should get away, or in what manner she could carry out her flight. Then in the morning came the letter from Lady Arthur Millbanke urging her to go at once to Torrington House. This appeared to her to be a direct interposition of Providence in her favour. She thanked God devoutly upon her knees; then she got up, and went down into her husband's study and purloined the money she required for her journey out of his writing-table drawer. She had no compunctions in doing this, because Adam told her it was all originally her own, and that she was only robbing him of what she had given to him. Dr Fairgrave was away from home, presumably in the arms of the fascinating Hannah—the moment was a favourable one for her purpose. Old Adam got the loan of his son-in-law's tax cart

(the same in which he had driven Elizabeth in to the political meeting at the Town Hall), in order to drive her to the train. She packed up everything she could lay hold of, in her boxes—for she was troubled by no sentimental scruples on that score—and she started, leaving the following note pinned with two black pins to the middle of the pin-cushion on her husband's dressing-table.

“Your disgraceful proceedings with that vile creature have come to my knowledge. I am leaving you to-day for ever. I shall at once institute proceedings for a divorce from you, and shall resume immediately the name which I bore before I became degraded by bearing yours.
ISABELLA BERTRAM.”

Old Adam saw her safely into the London train, and then came back and finished hoeing up his potato bed in the kitchen garden with an untroubled conscience.

When angrily questioned later in the day by his infuriated master, he scratched his head, and his face became a blank.

“He didn’t knoa noathin’ at all ’bout the Missus. How should he? He moinded ’is own business, ’e did, and wished other people ’ud do the sa-ame!” and then he spit into his horny hands, and went on grubbing up the roots.

The same day, late in the afternoon, Mrs Bertram, as she determined henceforth to call herself once more, arrived at the door of Torrington House, and fell upon her daughter's neck.

“Elizabeth,” she cried, as she clung weepingly to her child, “I wish you had never left me, and I wish I had never disgraced your dear father's memory by marrying that brute—”

“My dearest mother—”

Elizabeth's eyes were wide and hollow, and her pretty colour had all faded away. She strained her weeping mother to her breast, and forgave her the past as she did so.

“Will you let me stay with you, Elizabeth? I will never go back to Dr Fairgrave. He has struck me, and he has been unfaithful to me—I whom men used positively to adore! I am going to get a divorce from him. May I live with you? I know I was hard upon you once, my love!—and about Guy Brabberstone—”

“Do not mention it, mother. You are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I—I—am very lonely,” she added falteringly.

“But your husband—dear Sir James—how is he?”

“He is better, but his mind is affected—he does not know me!” answered Elizabeth; and because she was weak and unstrung she burst into tears, for the first time in her whole life, upon her mother's bosom.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ON THE BRINK.

MRS BERTRAM, as she insisted now upon calling herself, had been nearly a week at Torrington House, and during that time she had become indispensable to the sick man.

Sir James was now, as far as his bodily health went, out of danger for the present; he was not more of a cripple than he had been before the last attack; he could be got up and dressed, and eat his food, and be drawn about in his wheel-chair as before—but, mentally, an extraordinary change had come over him. He did not know his wife; and he had taken an unconquerable dislike and repugnance to her. He could not bear her to be near him, and if she attempted to speak to him, he would call out in great agitation to her to go away, and complain fretfully to others about him that he could not stand being troubled by a stranger when he was so ill.

Simultaneously with this delusion there arose another in his poor weakened brain. From the moment he caught sight of Elizabeth's mother, he welcomed her with positive rapture. His enfeebled memory, overlooking the immediate past of his life, went back, as it frequently does in sickness and in old age, to those long years ago when he had loved and wooed the beautiful Miss Lanyers. The faded lady became once more to him the image of youth and beauty, the love of his manhood whom he had worshipped, the type of all that was delightful in womanhood.

He had forgotten her daughter utterly and completely, and by a strange hallucination, he addressed his mother-in-law in the terms of admiration and affection he had been used to pour upon his young wife.

In point of fact he imagined her to be his wife. Constantly he enlarged upon her charms of face and of person, repeating as he had often done to Elizabeth, his faith in the ever-living freshness of youth.

"There is nothing like it, my dear, nothing like it!" he would mumble indistinctly, with her hand locked in his. "It's worth all the powder and rouge in the world, to look at the bloom on your sweet face, and to meet those bright eyes of yours, my love!"

"I am afraid I have grown very old!" she would murmur, somewhat confusedly, yet not without a pleasant sensation of gratified feelings in listening to the flattery to which her ears had long been unaccustomed. "I am afraid I do not look so young as I used to, James."

"Every bit as young!" he would cry out, with as much

energy as his feeble voice was capable of. "You are not a day older than the first time I ever saw you, and you are quite as beautiful!"

And though she was well aware that he was under a delusion, and that he mistook her for her own daughter, yet so inextinguishable is the passion of vanity in the female bosom that she really more than half believed the words of the poor old dotard, and took pleasure in listening to them.

Meanwhile the doctors had banished Elizabeth from her husband's room. Her presence only excited and agitated him, and they told her that she must keep away from him.

The poor child wandered miserably about the desolate house by herself. If she had been allowed to wait upon him and to do her wifely duty to him she might have found in wholesome occupation the power to have resisted a temptation which, from being insignificant at first, grew day by day in strength and magnitude, until, alas! it overpowered her.

She had kept Marcus Cunningham's note. She had not read it again at first, but had locked it safely away in her dressing-case; she had meant to burn it some day, and never to read it again.

But somehow she did not burn it, and the day came when she took it out and read it, not once or twice, but over and over again until the words of it were burnt into her very soul.

Then she put it in the bosom of her dress, and never parted with it day nor night.

Two more days went slowly by. Elizabeth had nothing on earth to do. She wandered about the still and empty house, and over the silent and desolate garden.

She stood watching the water hens skim across the surface of the pond, and the great dragon flies whirl lazily amongst the bullrushes along the edge. She wandered down the shrubby walk where Marcus had told her that he loved her, standing still at the spot where he had stood, and sighing from the very depths of her sad heart as she turned slowly away from a place that reminded her so much of him. She gathered handfuls of flowers, and then threw them away listlessly upon the lawn, and she listened to the song of the birds amongst the trees until she felt as if she should go mad with the sound of it.

Nobody wanted her, nothing seemed left for to do upon earth. She had turned away from the call of a love that was unholy, with a feverish eagerness to drown its siren voice in the sterner and wholesomer claims of duty and of honour, and now duty had mocked her and slipped away into nothingness from between her clinging hands, whilst honour stood afar off like a faint and un-

real shadow, so that she had no longer the power to lay hold of it, or to summon it back out of the vague chaos that seemed to have neither any meaning nor any truth.

And so my poor little heroine, who had loved so unwisely and had suffered so much—who had just that sweet and tender nature which, in happy women, makes true and loving wives and mothers, but nothing of the heroine that can battle and buffet against all the unhappiness and the storms of this wicked world—fell—fell—fell! Down the steep slope of that precipice which yawned so terribly close to her trembling little feet.

One morning she made one last and feeble struggle. Her mother was with Sir James, she half opened the door and peeped timidly into the room.

Mrs Bertram flew towards her to prevent her entrance.

"Do not dream of coming in, Elizabeth; you know you ought not to come."

"Let me just see him once, mother," she pleaded. "Surely, surely he will remember me a little by this time?"

She pushed her mother gently aside, and entered.

Sir James was dressed, propped up in his armchair; his eyes were vacantly fixed upon the window; his hands moved quiveringly one over the other; his lips were muttering something uncertainly to himself.

Elizabeth came near, and fell down upon her knees by the side of his chair, laying her hands upon his arm.

"James, James! don't you know me? I am your wife—your poor little Elizabeth. Oh, do, do speak to me!"

He turned his head abruptly towards her, frowning heavily and angrily beneath his bent white brows as his eyes rested upon her.

"Take her away—take her away!" he cried hoarsely. "Here, my love, my love!" Mrs Bertram came running back to him; he clung to her pitifully. "Why do you let this woman in? I don't like her—take her away! I never saw her before, and I am too ill to be troubled with strangers—take her away!"

And then the sick-nurse came in from the next room, and they drove her away out of the room—out of the presence of the man who was her husband.

"Why did you try it?" said her mother reproachfully to her. "I told you how it would be, Elizabeth; now he will be worse all day. You should not have come in."

Elizabeth was as white as the jasmine flowers that came nodding in at the open window of the staircase. Her lips were stern and set; her eyes dark and scared; there was a hunted haunted look in them, as though they had seen some terrible thing.

Mrs Bertram was vaguely frightened by that strange and pallid face. She took the cold hands and pressed them between hers.

"Don't look so miserable, Elizabeth ; perhaps he will get better and know you some day. I did not think you cared so much about poor Jim ; but you see how dreadfully you upset him. You should not have come in."

"Do not be afraid, I will not come again," she answered ; and the words scarce seemed able to frame themselves upon her dry and parched lips.

Then she went away slowly downstairs.

A few minutes later, Lady Ingram went out alone from the house towards the straggling village street.

She turned in at the post-office door.

It was a wet day. For hours the rain had been coming down, straight and fine and steady upon the great city. The brown greasy mire oozed upon the roads, and under the feet of the passengers upon the pavements. Dripping umbrellas, shining with moisture, jogged along the streets and covered the tops of the omnibuses along the sodden thoroughfares.

A four-wheel cab drew up lumberingly at the corner of one of the less-frequented streets which run into Piccadilly. There was a box on the top of it.

The cabman got down slowly from his seat, and went to the door of his cab. The rain was dripping from his black mackintosh cape, and from the brim of his shabby pot hat.

A lady, cloaked from head to foot in a dark ulster, and closely veiled, got out and put up her umbrella.

"Wait for me here," she said, and walked away down the street, disappearing round the corner of the nearest turning.

The cabman waited in the rain. He had to wait a very long time.

When she got out of his sight she unfastened a button of her ulster, and looked at her watch. She was ten minutes behind her time.

She hurried on a little, and walked faster, until she came to a large doorway with two heavy carved doors thrown open inwards. Glancing in, she saw a small black-and-white tile-paved hall, and a stone staircase with an iron bannister running upwards. No one was in the hall. The lady passed on a little way, and then turned back to an equal distance on the further side ; then she turned back again, walking up and down in front of the open doorway, into which she looked anxiously each time that she repassed it.

She walked up and down in this way for very nearly an hour.

The rain came sullenly down, soaking into her petticoats, and through the soles of her somewhat slightly made boots, and dripped in great drops upon her shoulders off the points of her wet umbrella.

The minutes dragged slowly away. The street was short, and not much frequented. The passers-by were few and far between. Every time any one came by she hurried her pace, and peered eagerly under the advancing umbrella, only to fall back disheartened as she encountered the vacant glances of strangers. At first she walked briskly, as one who knows what is going to happen, and to whom the future is a certainty, but after a time her footsteps became slower and slower; the despair of disappointment imparted itself to her very gait, and her lagging feet failed and tottered beneath her. She became very wet, very cold, and terribly weary. Now and then she stood quite still by the side of the doorway for whole minutes at a time, once she crossed over the road and looked up earnestly at the windows of the house, only to come back again hopelessly and resume her dreary and monotonous walk.

She was chilled to the bone by the drizzling rain, and yet her head was on fire, and her heart in a fever.

Presently she muttered to herself, striking her little wet gloved hands miserably together.

"What can have happened to him? Why does he not come? He cannot have misunderstood me! My telegram was clear enough surely, and his answer, that came within an hour."

She drew it out of the inner pocket of her cloak, and read it over feverishly, as though to reassure herself with the sight of the words which she had already scanned more than fifty times.

They were plain enough.

"Come to-morrow—telegraph hour—wait outside—will be ready for you."

"And then I telegraphed back:—'Three o'clock—will wait outside.' Surely it was intelligible? He *cannot* have made a mistake? No, no; he is certain to come! Something must have detained him. There is nothing to do but to wait. He will be here presently."

And then she took heart, and resumed her walk again, trying to inspire herself with confidence and with certainty.

But another half-hour slipped away, and nothing happened and nobody came; and still Elizabeth Ingram was pacing wearily up and down in the rain.

And then all at once there came over her a horrible realisation of what she was doing, and of the awful abyss into which she was plunging. All the past events of her life passed in a

long and ghastly procession before her eyes. She saw herself again before her marriage, a little discontented with her lot,—a little sad because pleasure and brightness had passed her by, but innocent and good with the innocence and goodness of early girlhood. Then like a meteor flash had come the joy of her first and only love, the passion flame that had awakened within her, and the quickly-succeeding tempest of despair and abandonment. Then came a picture of her married life,—of the time when she had believed that she had forgotten, and had fancied herself to be safe,—when she had thrown herself so frantically into the pleasures of society, and had taken so much pride in her position and in her power of pleasing others. She saw herself once again, as in a mirror, dressed in her laces and diamonds, doing the honours of her house in Belgravia, with crowds of great and clever persons thronging about her and ministering to her vanity and her success. Who of all these people would recognise her now? Which of them would not turn their back upon her in horror and disgust could they see her at this moment?—a wretched lost woman who had left her husband's house to throw herself upon the love of her lover!—a miserable creature with no look-out save disgrace—no future beyond that of an outcast!

She shuddered a little, and leant against the wet wall of the house, covering her face with her hand. There was no one in the street; besides, she was past caring what any one might think of her now—almost past the physical wretchedness of the driving rain that was soaking her to the skin.

Was he going to fail her for the second time in her life, this man for whom she was throwing away everything else on earth? Was the love after which she hungered so much to betray her yet once again and fall away from her like a hollow mockery at the very moment when she needed it and trusted to it the most blindly? Alas! was it not too late to turn back now? Had she not gone too far along the downward path for retreat? And how was the cold reward of virtue which there was none to heed or to bless her for, to repay her for the loss of the lover who had promised to devote his life to her?

Thus tossed and buffeted betwixt her conscience and her love, poor Elizabeth spent yet a few more miserable moments in striving desperately to be patient and to wait in faith for the man to whom she was about to sacrifice herself.

And then the moment came when she could wait no longer,—when her patience and her trust gave way utterly,—when she felt that she must *know*—or else die!

White as a ghost, trembling in every limb—with a beating

heart and a terror as of death itself in her soul—she turned into the small hall into which she had looked so many times in vain, and rang the porter's bell.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE HAND OF GOD.

It seemed a very long time before any one came. The bell, clanging loudly and harshly, reverberated round the small hall, and up the empty stone staircase, with strange and ghastly echoes that made her shiver.

At length from some lower region a dishevelled woman appeared at a distant corner.

"I rang for the porter," said Elizabeth.

"The porter is away on 'is 'oliday, miss. I'm in charge of the 'ouse. What do you please to want?"

"Is Mr Cunningham staying here?—can you tell me if he is in town?"

"Mr Cunningham, that's the second floor; oh, yes, to be sure he's 'ere, 'e 'aint been out to-day at all."

"Do you mean that he is *in*?" she cried breathlessly,—"*in the house now?*"

The woman nodded her tangled head.

"That's just what I *do* mean; 'e's in the 'ouse, a sitting hup-stairs, and a-packing hup 'is trunks; and 'e be going away to-day, as I hunderstand, for furrin parts."

"Show me up to his rooms, please."

A presentiment of evil, when she realised that he was so near to her, overcame her suddenly; her knees shook beneath her.

The old woman only jerked her thumb upwards.

"Second floor, miss; you'll find 'im; I ain't got no time to go clamberin' up them stairs; you can't make a mistake; second floor; the door just in front of you," and she vanished promptly down the opening behind her.

Elizabeth toiled with difficulty up the stone staircase, she was so cold and wet and frightened. Her breath came labouringly; it was as though ten years or more had gone over her head since the morning. The sound of her footsteps echoed one by one with horrible distinctness up the empty staircase.

She reached the second floor landing. A door with a small brass knocker faced her; she rapped it once feebly, then after a moment or two again, and this time more loudly. But no answer came.

Then, after an instant of hesitation, she turned the handle of the door and entered.

She found herself in a tiny vestibule, softly carpeted, and surrounded by well-filled bookcases. Another door was opposite her. Somehow a little courage came back to her. He could not, of course, have heard her knock; he was no doubt busy, so busy that perhaps he had not noticed the flight of the time. The sight of the books and the chairs, of a small table whereon were laid a bundle of travelling rugs, an umbrella and some walking sticks strapped together, and a foreign *Bradshaw* carelessly thrown down beside them, restored her startled senses. It was all so natural and so matter-of-fact. At any rate he was prepared to keep his word to her; he had not played her false, and deserted her.

She went to the further door and knocked softly. A little natural shyness and timidity overcame her; to go by herself into a man's chambers was an unaccustomed thing to her; a faint pink flush arose in her pale cheeks, a flutter of womanly reticence was in her breast. She seemed to see it all now; there must have been some misunderstanding; the telegram had confused him, and he was waiting for her within.

But yet there was no answer to her knock. She waited. She knocked again, and waited again. Nothing! Not a sound!

Then all her confidence and her courage forsook her once more, and she cried out his name aloud, and burst open the door.

He was sitting at the table, with his back to the door. His portmanteau, ready packed, stood on the floor. An open dressing-bag was upon a chair beside him, with a glitter of silver bottles shining in its yawning mouth. A litter of papers, bills, letters, and circulars lay about on the table. A pen stuck in the open inkstand, an empty soda-water bottle and a tumbler stood at his elbow.

She took in every detail; nothing escaped her. No one object in the disordered room but burnt itself then and for ever and ever afterwards into her brain.

And Marcus himself? Was he asleep, that he neither moved, nor stirred, nor spoke at her entrance?—that he did not hear her call his name, nor heed her swift footsteps behind his chair?

Hesat very very still, leaning a little forwards against the table; his elbows were raised upon it; his head, with its ruffled locks, was bent; his face buried in both his hands. Was he asleep?

She came behind him; she laid her hand upon his shoulder—and then—something froze her very heart into stone within her!

"Marcus," she whispered, in such a strange, weird, far-away whisper that it scarcely seemed to be a human voice that

breathed it, "Marcus! it is I—Elizabeth! I have come to you! Are you ill? Look up! Speak to me—speak to me! Speak to me!"

Her voice rose to a wail, and she shook him by the shoulder.

His elbow slipped helplessly away. His head fell heavily down. His face, white and still with the awful stillness of death, dropped prone upon the littered papers upon the table.

Marcus Cunningham would never look up, nor ever speak to her again!

Through the empty house there rang a wild and piercing scream. Like the shriek of a soul in torment it rent the silence of the still afternoon, arousing the old woman in terror from her basement, and startling a couple of passers-by in the street below into wonder and dismay.

When they came hurrying up the staircase, and burst open the doors of the second-floor rooms, there they found the Member for East Silshire stone dead in his chair, with his poor pale face upon the table—whilst a woman, young and fair, and delicately clad, but dripping with wet through every garment that she wore, lay stretched lifeless on the floor at his feet.

There was a leading article in the *Times* upon him the next morning. Posters with large letters were hawked about the streets that evening, and small boys shouted the news at every corner of the City.

"Sudden death of an M.P.," they bawled and holloaed; and people paid their pennies, and read the short paragraph, and were very sorry for a minute, and then went their way and forgot him.

His party were disgusted with him for dying. He was the most rising man amongst them all,—the finest orator that had been heard in the House for many a session,—the clearest-headed and most sound in his views of any of the younger members of the House. A great future was before him; a splendid career was already opening out to him. He was of inestimable value to the Conservative party. What business had he then to die? And they were almost angry with him in high places, for daring to remove himself so inopportunistly out of the political world, which wanted him so badly, into that other world where his great talents might very possibly be utterly thrown away.

For many days the papers were full of him,—of his early years,—of his careful training in his learned father's hands,—of his unsuccessful candidature for the northern borough, and his triumphant return for the Midland county. All this was

duly enlarged upon, mixed oddly up with hints of a "romantic engagement" to a well-known lady of fashion, which had lately been broken off. Then in picturesque language they dilated upon the sad death from unsuspected heart complaint, which had cut short the bright young life so nobly devoted to the service of his fellow-creatures, and to the good of the world at large.

It read very touchingly. A great many nicely-dressed and pretty women shed tears as they went through it all—murmuring "poor dear fellow!" and devoutly hoping that that wicked girl Rachel Brabberstone might be smitten with remorse and eternal repentance, when she learnt that her treatment of him had driven the poor man to his death.

For, of course, he was "broken-hearted;" that was what "heart disease" in his case meant!—broken-hearted because Rachel had jilted him; and he had died of it!

Wicked, wicked woman!

And the papers wrote themselves dry over him; and after they had related the incidents of "the last sad scene," as they termed the funeral in the village churchyard at the foot of the Sussex Downs, and had recorded the number of wreaths sent by titled and illustrious persons, and had quite done sighing over the loss which the country in general, and the Conservative party in particular, had sustained, then by that time there had come some very important and warlike telegrams from abroad, which were very much more interesting than raked-up details about poor Marcus Cunningham's history. And so the great waters of this world's oblivion closed in over the head that had gone down with untimely haste beneath their flood: other and more interesting topics supervened, and men spoke of him no more.

Because it is the way of the world that the dead shall be forgotten, and that the living only shall be remembered in the strife!

And all this time Elizabeth lay at the point of death, and knew nothing of it. How her name had been kept out of the inquest and out of the papers was a mystery known only to one or two persons on earth—of whom Sir Frederick Cunningham was presumably one, and Lady Arthur Millbanke undoubtedly another.

It happened that Sir Frederick was the first person belonging to him who entered poor Marcus's room after the terrible discovery of his death. Sir Frederick had come up to London for the day, and not having heard for nearly a week from his son, he thought he would call at his rooms to ascertain whether he was in town or no.

And so, unsuspecting and unprepared, he walked suddenly

into that Chamber of Death, to find an hysterical charwoman, and a couple of strangers out of the street, wringing their hands over the dead body of his only son.

To find also the lifeless form of Lady Ingram stretched on the floor by his side!

Sir Frederick recognised her at once—and quick as lightning he realised that some terrible tragedy of love and despair had taken place between her and the dead man, and that at all hazards she must be removed off the scene ere her name became irrevocably coupled with the catastrophe.

Sir Frederick was nothing if not a man of the world. Amidst all his own anguish he did not lose an instant in doing what was essential to save the reputation both of the woman who was alive, and of the man who was already dead.

He despatched a messenger at once to Curzon Street; not an hour ago he had passed Lord and Lady Arthur in a cab, covered with luggage, so that he knew them to be in town.

In ten minutes Blanche was in the room, and between them they carried the still insensible woman downstairs and placed her in the cab that was waiting outside. After they were gone, Sir Frederick sent for the nearest doctor, and invented on the spur of the moment a statement to the effect that his son's heart had long been known to be affected.

The doctor found that the poor man must have been dead for several hours, and as the woman of the house could swear that the lady had only entered the house five minutes before her screams summoned her from below, it was evident that Lady Ingram could not be implicated in the faintest degree in his death. Having settled this point conclusively in his own mind, Sir Frederick's chief anxiety was to suppress the fact of her appearance on the scene altogether.

He could not have left Lady Ingram in better hands for his purpose. Blanche was fully as anxious as he was that Elizabeth should be kept out of it.

Elizabeth awoke from her long swoon to all the horrors of delirium and of raging brain fever. For days she knew no one and remembered nothing. Blanche had at once telegraphed to her mother, who to her dying day will believe that her daughter had gone up to London to meet her friend Lady Arthur on her return from Plymouth, and was taken ill at her house in Curzon Street.

When Elizabeth came back to life, white and weak and broken from the blank of her three weeks of fever and unconsciousness, the grass was already springing up sparsely upon Marcus Cunningham's newly-made grave.

What she recalled of that terrible day she never spoke about—what she remembered she made no sign of knowing, then, or ever after.

By degrees all that had happened, and how he had died, and how she had been found and hurried away from the scene, came little by little to her knowledge, but she made no comment upon it to others.

All through her illness she had raved and moaned, and the burden of her ravings was ever the same :—"Why does he not come? Why does he not come? Can he have forgotten? Can he be playing me false? I am so wet—so tired—so cold. Why does he not come?"

From all these broken cries Lady Arthur guessed at what must have happened; but after she got better she never spoke to her friend of that terrible day of waiting and despair. She knew now why he had not come,—knew that death with iron hand had stepped between them and their sin, and had pushed her back, trembling and stricken, from the very Portals of the Abyss into which she had been so ready to plunge.

And, like a true woman, she forgave him, because in his death he had meant to keep his faith to her,—forgave him for his sin, and loved him for his love.

A certain tenderness for him who would have dragged her down mingled itself with her own remorse and penitence. "Mine was the chief sin, it is right that mine should be the hardest punishment." That was what she said to herself in her heart; and she was almost glad to think that he had died when he had,—whilst yet his fame was clear and unsullied, and his name free from stain of wrong or shame.

And no doubt for his public reputation it was well that poor Marcus had died,—died ere he had lived long enough to degrade his genius, and to ruin his career, by so mad an action as that which he undoubtedly contemplated in his last hour. Whilst for her—God knows it was infinitely best! For Marcus Cunningham was not a man to whom the world would ever have been "well lost for love," nor, when his passion had spent itself, would he have ceased to regret that he had flung away the whole of his future for the sake of another man's wife. He would have tired of her, and he would have left her!

Perhaps she knew this herself at the very bottom of her sad and desolate heart; for, after many slow and weary weeks had gone by—after much sorrow and many heart-rending tears, there came a day when Elizabeth could lift her eyes to the blue heaven above her, and say, from the very bottom of her penitent heart,—

"I thank the good God for His great mercy to me—a sinner!"

She has gone back to her husband's house. Sir James may linger on for months or even for years; he will never recover his intellect again, but he has lost the repugnance and shrinking dislike he at one time experienced for his wife. He likes to have her near him now, and will sit for hours crooning over her hand, and smiling happily at her; and she and Mrs Bertram—become Mrs Bertram again now by law as well as by courtesy—spend their life in tending him, and in soothing the clouded sadness of the poor old man's last days on earth. There is mostly a gentle confusion in his mind as to which is which of the ministering angels who wait upon him—he speaks to them both often in terms of conjugal endearment; but that matters very little, because both are dear to him, and both have the power to make him happy and content.

And both mother and daughter have a comfort in one another which they had never before in their life experienced. Trouble and disappointment have softened them both—the elder woman has become more unselfish, the younger more humble and more distrustful of herself. Often they look forward gladly, and with simple pleasure, to the days ahead of them when the old man shall have passed away, and when they will go back and live together in the old home in Silshire, out of which the hateful presence of Gabriel Fairgrave has been for ever removed, and where they will tend their flowers, and potter about their garden, and enjoy that delightful love and companionship which between two women, of whom one is the mother and the other the daughter—is the nearest approach to the Peace of Heaven that can be experienced upon earth.

Their remains but little to be told concerning the other characters of my story.

Sir Frederick Cunningham sits alone in his desolate house under the Sussex Downs, disappointed in his hopes, frustrated in his ambition, a solitary old man with the very mainspring of his life broken and destroyed.

Sometimes he wonders vaguely whether if he had taught his lost son to look less towards worldly advancement, and more towards the impulses of a simple and kindly heart, he might not on the whole have lived and died a better and happier man. He has a doubt now and again if his system of training was altogether the wisest, and if those things he inculcated so laboriously into his son's mind were, after all, those that are most worth living for.

But at the best these are only doubts and speculations, for Sir Frederick is getting old and broken, and when men are old they seldom lay aside the convictions and the prejudices of a lifetime.

Guy Brabberstone with much propriety drank himself to death. The family went, of course, into decent mourning, and outwardly preserved a show of respectable grief over the lamentable event. Perhaps, however, at their very hearts both Lord and Lady Brabberstone were not inclined to look upon his death as the most serious of the troubles that have befallen them.

For Rachel's marriage was a very serious trouble indeed to her parents at first, so serious that they would neither be present at her wedding nor hold out any hopes of pecuniary assistance to the young couple. But when poor Guy died their hearts became softened towards their only remaining child, and they forgave her for marrying to please herself instead of her parents, and became reconciled to her and to her husband.

Mr and the Honourable Mrs Vere Sherwood are quite the happiest and most devoted couple in the world. They live with Aunt Dudley in Craven Gardens, and will continue to do so until the dear old lady joins her Charles in heaven, and leaves them in sole possession of it; but they have so beautified and adorned the house that it is scarcely recognisable for the same.

Vere is a great man in his own world, and in the profession to which he is still ardently attached, but he is a greater man still in the eyes of the wife who worships him, not only because he is so great a musician, but also because he is so good a man, and because his unspoilt simplicity of heart and rectitude of purpose combine to make of him that rarest thing on earth—a perfectly and absolutely single-minded man.

The old Squire is often up in town staying with them, and Rachel laughingly declares that he and Aunt Dudley will some day make a match of it. Meanwhile he has decidedly renewed his love for the London of his youth, and has become quite a familiar figure at the midnight meetings of the Seraphian Club.

Vere's marriage has distinctly improved his social position as well as his business connection, and not to know the young composer and his beautiful wife argues a lamentable want of that knowledge of things in general upon which every true Londoner who is "in the swim" is wont to pride himself.

The Sherwoods are much sought after in society, he for his genius, she for her beauty and graciousness, and both of them

for that indefinable charm which insensibly surrounds those who have a good heart, and a candid and guileless nature.

For there is no littleness about Vere Sherwood ; he never makes Rachel feel how badly and shabbily she once treated him—in fact, he has made her forget it. His head is no more turned by success and adulation than his heart was degraded in the days of his poverty and humiliation. And once when he and Lady Arthur Millbanke were thrown upon each other's society at a lengthy dinner-party for some hours together, they fraternised at once, and were so thoroughly in sympathy with one another that a fast friendship was struck up between them from that very hour.

The pen of commendation can go no farther ! But then, as in Lady Arthur, everything that was good, and great, and noble found an echo in Vere Sherwood's breast.

There was only one small piece of spite left in him. He would never allow his wife to return the cards of the Marquis of Donought, and of his daughters the Ladies Idell !

THE END.

